

THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION'S SECONDARY SCHOOL EXCHANGE

Equipping young people with the communication skills and cross-cultural understanding they need to thrive and build a more collaborative world.



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

discovering voices

esu.org/sse

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'My year in America completely changed the way I see the world.'

Thomas Tennett, SSE Scholar 2021-2022

Read more:



A LIFE-CHANGING SCHOLARSHIP

The English-Speaking Union's Secondary School Exchange (SSE) is a prestigious transatlantic scholarship programme offering an extraordinary gap year opportunity for young people seeking academic enrichment and cultural exchange before embarking on their university studies. Since its founding in 1928, the programme has given thousands of exceptional UK students the opportunity to spend an academic year studying at leading independent schools in the United States, and welcoming thousands of equally outstanding American students to do the same in the UK. Scholars benefit from fully funded tuition, making this a rare opportunity to experience a world-class international education at a highly prestigious institution.

For nearly a century, the SSE has opened doors to life-changing experiences, enabling young people to immerse themselves in a new academic environment, develop lasting international friendships, and broaden their perspectives at a formative moment in their lives. Scholars return to their home countries to begin further studies at leading universities, enriched by a year that sets them apart from their peers.

More than simply a gap year, the SSE is a carefully curated academic and cultural exchange. Scholars study a wide range of subjects, including many not typically available to them within their home curriculum. Freed from the immediate pressures of examinations, they are encouraged to rekindle intellectual curiosity, pursue new interests and deepen their academic strengths.

Central to the experience is a distinctive approach to learning which helps students to develop valuable university level skills. American teaching places a strong emphasis on independent

thinking, classroom discussion and active participation, helping scholars grow in confidence and intellectual curiosity. Beyond the classroom, scholars immerse themselves in American culture and become fully involved in school life; they embrace opportunities in sports, arts and leadership, as well as hallmark cultural experiences such as prom, spring break and graduation.

Since its founding in 1928, the SSE has built a remarkable legacy. Alumni include generations of accomplished individuals across diverse fields, united by a shared experience that continues to shape their personal and professional lives. Their ongoing engagement as ambassadors and champions of the ESU's work reflects the lasting impact of the programme and reinforces its reputation as an exceptional and enduring community. Lifelong friendships, global connections and a unique sense of belonging are integrated at the heart of the programme and live on long after scholars return home.

Today, the Secondary School Exchange stands as one of the most distinguished opportunities of its kind: a year of academic enrichment, cultural discovery and personal growth that leaves an indelible mark on those selected to take part.

Find out more:



'The Secondary School Exchange gave me an opportunity to meet people from completely different backgrounds, to feel a sense of independence as a young person within the structure of a very safe environment and was one of the most exciting things I've ever done in my life.'

KT Tunstall, SSE Scholar 1992-93

Read more:





‘With every term came new classes and new friendships... Having lived in a structure of education that requires early specialism in the UK, being allowed further freedoms through senior electives was eye-opening.’

Seren Happs, SSE Scholar 2023–24

Read more:



SKILLS FOR LIFE

Integrating the ESU’s SSE scholarship into a university pathway is a unique and impactful way to distinguish students academically and personally. It offers a rare opportunity to experience a different education system, broaden intellectual horizons and develop the skills, confidence and perspective that universities and future employers value highly.

ACADEMIC ENRICHMENT

An SSE scholarship allows students to study a broad range of subjects at a prestigious American school, including courses not typically available in the British curriculum, while discovering new interests and preparing for further education. Discussion-based teaching and active classroom participation are central to American teaching, and help scholars develop confidence, curiosity and strong independent study habits. Many students also have the chance to take electives, pursue advanced classes and explore disciplines linked to their future plans. This academic flexibility allows them to deepen existing strengths while trying subjects they may not have encountered

at home. Some schools encourage students to follow through with exams, allowing students to come home with more qualifications. In other instances, students study for the joy of learning and without exam pressure.

PERSONAL GROWTH

Living and studying abroad requires scholars to step outside their comfort zone, adapt to new surroundings and embrace unfamiliar experiences with confidence. Through navigating a different education system, building new friendships and experiencing everyday life in another country, they develop greater independence, resilience and maturity. The experience fosters self-confidence, personal responsibility and a broader outlook on the world, equipping students with valuable life skills that will benefit them in whatever they choose to do next.

CULTURAL EXCHANGE & INTERNATIONAL FRIENDSHIP

SSE scholars experience full immersion in American school and community life, gaining first-hand insight into a different culture and way of learning. Through daily interactions and shared experiences with American and overseas students alike, our UK scholars build meaningful international friendships and develop a broader, more global perspective. These lasting connections and deep cultural understanding continue to shape their outlook long after the programme ends.



WHERE COULD THE SSE TAKE YOU?

UK scholars have recently studied at the following USA schools...

Culver Academies, Indiana

'A high school military academy in rural Indiana, surrounded by hundreds of miles of cornfields, it is probably not many people's ideas of a gap year... but my conceptions were fortunately grossly misplaced, and I had the most phenomenal time.'

Miles Contreras-Brown, SSE Scholar 2016-17

Western Reserve Academy, Ohio

'Western Reserve has an amazing campus and a real community feel.'

Olivia Thomas SSE Scholar 2021-22

Ethal Walker School, Connecticut

Westminster School, Connecticut

The Governor's Academy, Massachusetts

'A liberal, co-ed boarding school an hour away from Boston with every facility you could possibly imagine... [The Governor's Academy] could not have been more fun and exciting'

Thomas Tennett, SSE Scholar 2021-2022

Asherville School, North Carolina

Mercersburg Academy, Pennsylvania

'From the moment I arrived, Mercersburg became more than just a school; it became a second home. I threw myself into a vibrant academic and arts community, studying 10 different art subjects, including photography, videography, painting, drawing, ceramics, sculpture, dance, choral performance, arts practicum, and voice and vision.'

Lucia Gamble, SSE Scholar 2024-25

Tabor Academy, Massachusetts

'Known as the 'School By The Sea', [Tabor Academy] was in a really beautiful New England setting and it was just one of the best experiences of my life.'

Chis Hawkins, SSE Scholar 1993-94 and BBC Radio Presenter

Our recent SSE scholars have come from the following UK schools...

- Cobham Hall School, Kent
- Gresham's School, Norfolk
- Langley School, Norfolk
- Dollar Academy, Strirling
- Charterhouse, Surrey
- Eastbourne College, East Sussex
- Wells Cathedral School, Somerset
- Durham School, County Durham
- Giggleswick School, North Yorkshire

YOUR SSE JOURNEY STARTS HERE

SEPTEMBER

- Online applications open

OCTOBER

- Parent & student online information evening, run by the ESU

JANUARY

- Online applications close
- Shortlisted applicants invited to assessment day in London

FEBRUARY

- Assessment day
- ESU team matches successful candidates with a US school

MARCH – MAY

- Successful candidates are notified of their proposed US host school, and have an online interview with the school
- Scholarship offer

AUGUST – SEPTEMBER

- UK scholars depart to the US!

Exact programme dates and key deadlines vary each year and will be shared well in advance directly with participating UK schools. Students should speak to their teacher/s for the specific dates that apply to their programme cycle. Please note, US terms often start at the end of August.



HOW TO APPLY

Applications are accepted via an online application form. The ESU will provide a link to this form and full details to the relevant teacher/member of staff in each host school, who will distribute the application form and guidance to any interested students. The application form will require:

- Some personal details about the student and what they study
- A personal statement (no longer than 400 words)
- Parental consent
- A short teacher reference from the student's headteacher, head of year or form tutor

Please reach out to international@esu.org if you have any questions.

ELIGIBILITY

The ESU welcomes applications from any young people who:

- Attend a participating ESU SSE host school
- Will have completed their A-Levels (or equivalent) before departing
- Have a minimum of three (predicted) B grades at A-Level (or equivalent)
- Will be under 19 years of age when they take up the scholarship
- Are British or Irish Citizens

THE SCHOLARSHIP AND ADDITIONAL COSTS

Each scholarship covers the cost of board and tuition at a private high school, worth \$60,000-\$80,000. Scholars are fully-fledged students at their host school for the duration of their stay, with access to all the school's facilities and activities.

However, scholars are responsible for all additional costs including travel to and from the US, health and travel insurance, sports kit, uniform and books. These costs depend on several factors such as where the host school

is situated, how much additional travelling the scholar does and how they spend their free time.

The ESU offers means-tested financial assistance, which scholars can apply for. These bursaries are given to support scholars with the additional costs of the programme, but they are limited. Many scholars use the summer holidays to save money for their time in the US, and most rely on financial support from their family.

AN EXTRAORDINARY NETWORK

Our SSE scholars form a distinguished community of alumni defined by ambition, creativity and influence, following in the footsteps of individuals who have gone on to succeed in an incredible range of fields. This network includes figures such as singer-songwriter KT Tunstall; Sir Ian Blair, former Metropolitan Police Commissioner; Sir Richard Dearlove KCMG OBE, former Head of MI6; and actor and comedian Dawn French.

FINDING A NEW HOME: LUCIA'S SSE STORY

It's hard to believe that my year at Mercersburg Academy in Pennsylvania has come to an end. What began in London nearly two years ago with a competitive application to the English-Speaking Union's Secondary School Exchange scholarship has since become the most transformative, exciting and enriching chapter of my life.

From the moment I arrived, Mercersburg became more than just a school; it became a second home. I threw myself into a vibrant academic and arts community, studying 10 different art subjects, including photography, videography, painting, drawing, ceramics, sculpture, dance, choral performance, arts practicum, and voice and vision. I also took two advanced English courses; Stories of Post-Colonial Resilience and Introduction to Professional Criticism; both of which pushed me intellectually and gave me new ways to view the world.

What made my time at Mercersburg even more meaningful was how much I stepped outside of my comfort zone. Despite having no prior experience, I auditioned for the choir and was given a place as a soprano, something I never imagined myself doing.

Beyond the classroom, I embraced opportunities to connect with the wider community, volunteering to pack clothes and toys for Samaritan's Angel Tree Trust and assembling food

parcels for a local homeless shelter. During the holiday season, my friends and I went carolling at the local library for young children, accompanied by the school jazz band. These moments grounded me and reminded me of the impact small acts of kindness can have.

Dorm life was its own adventure. I lived in Swank Hall with 36 incredible girls and our much-loved dorm dog, Mulligan. We built a family together, sharing the highs and lows of daily life and taking part in unforgettable school traditions like Paint the Number, Founder's Day, 'Swanksgiving', The Christmas Dance, and Declamation; the highly-respected Irving Marshall speaking contest. This event is the culmination of a week's activities, with each society represented by five students who perform 8-10 minute monologues in front of the entire school. And then of course there was graduation, one of the most beautiful and emotional days of my life, a perfect close to a year that exceeded all expectations.

When I first boarded the flight to the US, I was nervous about fitting in and adapting to a new culture. But after just a few weeks, homesickness faded and Mercersburg felt like home. I miss it every single day. In such a short space of time, my experience in the USA has opened my eyes and inspired me in too many ways to count. I am so grateful to everyone who has supported me on this journey. Thank you to Mercersburg, the ESU, my teachers, my friends, my dorm, my teammates, and everyone who made this year one I will carry with me forever.

Lucia Gamble,
SSE Scholar 2024-25

'From the moment I arrived, Mercersburg became more than just a school; it became a second home.'



Read the full story:





The English-Speaking Union is a charity with a mission to equip young people with the communication and critical thinking skills they need to thrive and build a more collaborative world. Through our delivery of oracy training workshops for teachers and students, and through our globally renowned national and international oracy and debating competitions, we reach over 100,000 young people each year.

By helping these young people to discover their voices and the agency they can have, we are shaping a world where individuals, communities and ultimately nations can engage via civil, reasoned debate, and work together to address our shared challenges.

We build relationships that last a lifetime, sustained by a vibrant alumni network full of lifelong supporters who return as passionate judges, generous donors, and committed advocates for our work. We are a force that helps bring people and nations together to address our joint challenges. The ESU and our work are needed today more than ever.

The Secondary School Exchange is one of the ESU's longest-standing and most prestigious programmes, offering students the chance to experience academic excellence, cultural immersion and personal growth through a year studying in the United States.

By taking part, scholars join a global community of ESU alumni whose experiences continue to shape their education, careers and outlook long after their exchange year ends.



'The SSE was a unique, hugely enriching experience and one that has made a massive difference to my life and how I view things... [it] has made me more confident and more comfortable in my own skin and, even more importantly it has reminded me to enjoy life and to soak it all up.'

Olivia Thomas SSE Scholar 2021-22



Read more:



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discovering voices



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