

STATEMENT OF GRANT PURPOSE
English Teaching Assistantship

Russia and the United States have a long history of fluctuating tension. Recently, the newly inaugurated presidents of the two world powers have publicly recognized the importance of improving relations. As the nations extend efforts to ameliorate tensions on a political scale, it is an exciting and critical time to build relationships between Americans and Russians on a personal scale. While teaching language skills as an English Teaching Assistant in Russia, I will extend my knowledge of American history and culture to Russian students and community members in order to facilitate intercultural discussion that encourages understanding.

I first became interested in Russia when I tested my language abilities in an introductory Russian language course in high school. My curiosity about Russian history and culture grew when I lived for a year in a town in Finland situated only miles from the Russian border. There, I studied the history between the two countries and observed modern-day interactions between Russians and Finns. Inspired by my growing knowledge of Russian relations, I began the series of Russian language courses offered at the University of Rochester upon my return to the United States. Presently, I have completed introductory through advanced language courses and have supplemented my study with Russian history and literature in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Russian culture and politics, past and present.

In "Politics of Identity," a course analyzing nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian culture, ethnicity and politics, I became interested in how people identify themselves as Russians within a complicated history of foreign influences and regional traditions. In order to further explore the intricacies of Russian identity in the modern world, I intend to engage my students in class discussions that compare and contrast notions of American and Russian identity. While enhancing the students' language skills, dialogue about identity will provide an opportunity for fruitful exchange of cultural information. I also plan to develop this study outside of the classroom through interviews with community members and through participant-observation at community-held events, especially those which either aim to protect tradition or advocate change. A person's thoughts about tradition compared to his or her actual practices will provide great insight into how Russian traditional identity affects the contemporary formation of self. The interviewing and analytical skills I developed through studying anthropology as well as the university level courses I have taken that highlight American history prepare me for this qualitative research. Not only will this activity extend my knowledge of the nuances of Russian identity and culture, but it will provide me with the opportunity to enhance my Russian language and communication skills. It will also prepare me for future research in the field of community development upon my return to the United States.

As a teaching assistant in the Spring of 2009 for an introductory course to cultural anthropology, I gained insight into the power of teaching as a tool for exchanging ideas. I developed my ability to define and articulate concepts while engaging the students in active discussion that created space for debate. As a biweekly tutor for Russian-speaking refugees in the City of Rochester, I have learned that teaching (and specifically language training) must be built on patience and creativity. The students encourage me to individualize my approaches to helping them connect with their academic studies. Also, through presentations I gave to Rotary clubs and school groups as a student ambassador in Finland, I learned how to represent my country while maintaining my individuality and debunking stereotypes. These past teaching experiences both prepare me for and inspire my interest in the ETA program in Russia.