

Educational and Cultural Exchanges to Restore America's Image

Whoever wins the presidential race in 2008 will be faced with the challenge of restoring the U.S. image in the rest of the world. A June 2007 study by the Pew Foundation documented negative perceptions of the United States in just about every part of the globe. Over the last five years, the percentage of people with a favorable image of the United States has decreased 11 percent in Japan, 18 percent in Argentina, 30 percent in Germany, and 32 percent in Indonesia.¹ Even in the United Kingdom, the number of people with favorable U.S. views is a meager 51 percent.

The causes for these changes and the depth of the feelings are complex and open to debate. What is clear, however, is the need to deal with the perception problem. Reputations matter. Although the rise of negativity is not as catastrophic as many analysts claim, as President Nicolas Sarkozy of France remarked to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, "It's difficult when the country that is the most powerful, the most successful—that is, of necessity, the leader of our side—is one of the most unpopular countries in the world. It presents overwhelming problems for you and overwhelming problems for your allies."²

Enhancing the U.S. reputation will require a multipronged strategy, at the center of which must be a carefully crafted public diplomacy component. Public diplomacy can be defined for the purposes of this article as coordinated attempts to shape perceptions and views of the United States in the rest of the world. Creating a successful strategy for public diplomacy will require rethinking some fundamental assumptions that have driven efforts over the last two presidential administrations.

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The exercise of public diplomacy has changed in an environment where technology moves information quickly and the U.S. government is less trusted. A new strategy must rely less on traditional media, and the messengers cannot be people who are perceived as spokespersons for U.S. foreign policy. Crafting this strategy requires a thorough understanding of the role of cultural and educational exchanges, or what is commonly called citizen diplomacy. Exchanges as well as citizen diplomacy more generally have typically been perceived as important but limited due to the small number of participants. This perception ignores the tremendous infrastructure that exists and the many ways it could be leveraged. Large-scale and influential public diplomacy could be achieved with a modest increase in federal dollars directed at partnerships between the federal government and a vast network of cultural and educational organizations that already exist.

Expanding the Public Diplomacy Tool Kit

U.S. public diplomacy has historically enjoyed success, having spawned a mature profession and associated industries in the public and private sectors. The United States has traditionally taken a dual-track approach to public diplomacy. One track largely focused on media and messaging. For example, the work done by the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) through programs such as Voice of America was highly effective in conveying an impression of the United States within Eastern Bloc countries as the land of liberty and justice. American values and ways of life were broadcast to millions of people as the USIA published magazines in dozens of foreign languages, conducted research on attitudes, distributed books and films, and sponsored exhibitions. These tactics were part of a well-coordinated strategy that shaped public opinion behind the iron curtain, which was important to winning the Cold War.

A second track has been cultural and education exchanges, or citizen diplomacy. Perhaps the best-known example is the Fulbright Program, which was established after World War II by Senator William Fulbright (D-Ark.) as a way to promote mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries of the world. Fulbright grants allow U.S. citizens and nationals of other countries to engage in a variety of educational activities, including university lecturing, advanced research, graduate study, and teaching in elementary and secondary schools abroad. Research on international Fulbright participants found that 99 percent reported better understanding of the United States and its culture, 96 percent shared their experiences through media or cultural activities when returning to their home country, and 89 percent reported that their experience allowed them to assume leadership positions after returning home.³

Another example is the Sister Cities program, initiated by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1956 as part of a White House conference on citizen diplomacy calling for people-to-people exchanges. At the conference, Eisenhower said, "If we are going to take advantage of the assumption that all people want peace, then the problem is for people to get together and to leap governments ... to work out not one method but thousands of methods by which people can gradually learn a little bit more of each other."⁴ The program was premised on the notion of U.S. cities forming relationships with cities across the world.

The program is highly decentralized, with the federal government providing funds to a variety of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that administer parts of the program, working with U.S. cities to create tailored partnerships with communities abroad. The cities share information and best practices on a common problem in ways that foster mutual understanding and cooperation. Miami Beach has set up a number of Sister City relationships as a way to share ideas regarding municipal services and programs. Fifth-grade students from San Pablo, California, have partnered with their peers in Manzanillo, Mexico, on ecological issues. The students spend a year sharing ideas, learning about local problems, and talking about solutions to living a more sustainable life. Once the relationships are seeded, local public- and private-sector funds are used to sustain and support them over time. This program, like many exchange programs, involved a powerful partnership between the government and the social and private sectors. Unfortunately, much of this early public diplomacy infrastructure was prematurely dismantled at the end of the Cold War. In the mid-1990s, Congress ended funding for USIA libraries and binational cultural centers, programs were downsized, and the USIA was folded into the Department of State with unfortunate consequences.

To its credit, the Bush administration has tried to rebuild this public diplomacy infrastructure. Budgets are up, new programs have emerged, and the issue is back on the policy agenda. Despite this effort, the administration's public diplomacy has been largely unsuccessful, as demonstrated by international polls. The main reason, of course, is the disconnect between U.S. actions and its messages. For example, U.S. messages about the environment stand in stark contrast to its refusal to sign a number of global environmental agreements, such as the Kyoto Protocol. In fact, a June 2007 Pew Global Attitudes survey of 47 countries found that the United States "is the nation blamed most often for hurting the world's environment."⁵ A second factor has been the tendency of President George W. Bush and others to talk in a

A new strategy must rely less on traditional media and official spokespersons.

way that appears arrogant to foreign audiences. This perception will hopefully change with a new presidential administration, but other factors will not easily change and must be considered by the next administration as part of a revitalized public diplomacy strategy.

Traditional, media-driven forms of public diplomacy will be less successful in an age marked by the tremendous growth and decentralization of communication and information technologies. The shift from broadcast to interactive communications has made it more difficult to capture people's attention and easier for them to more critically evaluate the disjuncture between U.S. values claims and actions. It has also given rise to a general distrust of sanctioned or official news, as people, especially the youth, place greater trust in informal Web logs, Web sites, and other "authentic" media. These tendencies are reinforced by general distrust of the U.S. government, which is largely a product of the Iraq war and the global war on terrorism. University of Delaware Professor Ralph Begleiter stated that the United States needs to move beyond "Hollywood or Madison Avenue campaigns" in order to make authentic connections with people.⁶ Further, for the message to be effective, the messenger should ideally be someone other than the U.S. government.⁷

The United States should not necessarily abandon media-driven strategies, but any successful strategy needs to be delivered by messengers who are perceived to be authentic and by media that move information in multiple directions. Some of the most interesting work today is exploring uses of internet-based Web 2.0 technologies that provide virtual platforms for the free exchange of ideas and collaborative social action. TakingItGlobal.org has created a global social network of 100,000 youth from 200 countries who share information on everything from the war in Iraq to living with HIV/AIDS. Watching the site evolve, it is clear that NGOs, foundations, and government agencies are trying to find ways to tap into these platforms to shape perceptions, mostly by working with participants to have articles posted and freely debated. Although Web-based technologies are opening up interesting new avenues, their full promise has yet to be demonstrated. Consequently, person-to-person exchanges will have to play a more prominent role in shaping the U.S. relationship with the world.

The Power of Cultural and Educational Exchange

Decades of research work have documented the value of face-to-face interactions in fostering understanding and affinity across nations and cultures. Efforts such as the 75-year-old Experiment in International Living, the Peace Corps, and the State Department's International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) have brought generations of Americans together with people from

around the world in ways that instill lifelong respect and admiration for the United States among foreign nationals. Recent research on the IVLP found that close to 90 percent of alumni believe the program created positive impressions of the United States and Americans.⁸ Through all these programs, people come together one on one to develop friendships while acquiring the intercultural skills and curiosity about the world needed to become citizen diplomats in their daily lives. Edward R. Murrow suggested more than 40 years ago when he was director of USIA that “[t]he really crucial link in the international communications chain is the last three feet, which is best bridged by personal contact—one person talking to another.”

Face-to-face interactions break through national stereotypes.

At the core of the research on exchange is a simple but powerful finding: the American public is the greatest asset the United States has to promote its noblest values to the world. Nancy Snow, a senior research at the University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy, recently wrote:

The primary source of America's image campaign must be drawn directly from the American people. First, it's the private citizens of the U.S. who are most comfortable with acknowledging with some degree of humility that the U.S. has made mistakes in its past.... Second, it's the American people who can better initiate direct contact with people in other countries whose support and understanding we need on the state of world opinion. The American people are the best ad campaign going for the world.... Finally, it is also the American patriotic duty of dissent that can best illustrate to the world what a free society means.⁹

There is an extensive body of literature on the ability of face-to-face interactions to break through national stereotypes.¹⁰ This theme shows up consistently in the literature on team management, conflict resolution, education, and debates over technology and effective communication. In a recent book, retired Foreign Service officer Yale Richmond questions much of the conventional wisdom about the Cold War, making a strong case that cultural exchanges mattered more than previously recognized.¹¹ The basic finding across the research is that face-to-face interactions tend to be multidimensional. In other words, people communicate through verbal and nonverbal signals that tend to be accepted by the listener as authentic and honest.¹² There is less questioning, more acceptance, and a more rapid change in perceptions. The change often reflects an emerging view that similarities far outweigh differences and that remaining differences can be viewed as enriching rather than

threatening. Sherry Mueller recently explained that, “to the extent that free access to the diversity of the U.S. is an inherent part of a particular exchange program, the foreign participants will perceive how much we truly value freedom, openness, and our democratic institutions.”¹³

Exchanges tend to be grossly underestimated in terms of the scalability of their impact. Although most individual exchange programs are small, impacting a few hundred to a few thousand people a year, many programs are operational at any given time. In the realm of public exchanges, programs sponsored by the U.S. government include the Fulbright Program, Citizen Exchanges, the IVLP, and the U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID) Community Connections. These programs bring foreign leaders to the United States to meet their American peers and receive professional training while gaining a better understanding of U.S. history and heritage. The Interagency Working Group on U.S. Government–Sponsored International Exchanges and Training estimated in its 2006 annual report that there are 239 exchange programs administered by 64 different federal agencies and departments.¹⁴

There has also been a steady increase in U.S. high school students going abroad on summer exchange programs. A range of new organizations, such as Where There Be Dragons, which sends students to the developing world, has joined long-standing programs, such as World Learning’s Experiment in International Living, Putney Student Travel, and AFS. Universities are also heavily focused on internationalizing the undergraduate experience. According to the Institute of International Education, the number of college students studying abroad as part of their college experience has increased by 150 percent over the last decade to more than 220,000 students per year.¹⁵ The Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act, currently working its way through Congress, would commit the United States to sending a million students abroad each year by 2010.

Too often ignored, arts-based exchanges have played a long and positive role in building relationships and friendships across the globe. A State Department advisory committee recently referred to cultural diplomacy as the linchpin of public diplomacy, highlighting the ability of the arts to reveal the “soul of a nation.”¹⁶ Going back to the days of Nelson Rockefeller, musicians, artists, and writers have proven effective at conveying American values.

Religious organizations, sports associations, and volunteer organizations also use informal channels in a host of ways to create international exchanges.

Study abroad remains largely populated by white liberal arts students from elite colleges.

Moreover, in the professional realm, recent efforts by organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce and Business for Diplomatic Action have started purposeful efforts at public diplomacy from within the business and professional community. Rotary International has long been involved in this work. Finally, the Department of Defense runs the International Military Education and Training programs, which bring thousands of foreign officers to the United States annually.

When taken together, these cultural and education exchange programs already include several million participants every year and could be greatly expanded with existing infrastructure. Yet, any conversation about scale has to look beyond the base number of exchanges to include the multiplier effects associated with them. For example, an American on a youth exchange or a foreign national in the United States may stay with a family, work in a community organization, and have a broad array of interactions along their journey. In this manner, exchanges have the potential to positively affect tens of millions of people every year.

Making Cultural and Educational Exchanges Work

For cultural and educational exchanges to be effective public diplomacy tools, they need to be intentional and purposeful, driven by four core principles:

- send a diversity of people to a diversity of places,
- develop exchanges based on principles of deep cultural immersion and interaction,
- empower current citizen diplomats, and
- target opinion leaders and influencers with a focus on the youth.

DIVERSITY

When the United States looks at sending Americans overseas, it should ensure that the face of America that the world sees resembles the face of America back home. A February 2008 report by the American Council of Education, the Art & Science Group, and the College Board found that although 55 percent of college-bound students report that they anticipate studying abroad during college, less than 5 percent actually do.¹⁷ Of that small percentage, less than 9 percent are black or Hispanic, even though these students constitute 25 percent of all college students. Overall, about 50 percent of the students who study abroad come from only 100 of the 4,000 universities and colleges in the United States.¹⁸ This is true for many kinds of exchange programs. If officials hope to position the United States as a pluralistic nation tolerant of

dissent and open to people of diverse backgrounds, they need to proudly present the nation's diverse face to the rest of the world.

The question of who participates prompts another: with whom is the United States exchanging? Colleges and universities need to pay increasing and constant attention to the geographic regions on which exchanges focus. Two-thirds of U.S. students who study abroad go to Europe.¹⁹ Only 15 percent go to Latin America, 7 percent to Asia, 3 percent to Africa, and 0.5 percent to the Middle East. As geopolitical and economic power shifts, study abroad and exchange programs need to stay relevant by including, if not emphasizing, emerging regions of geopolitical importance.

DEEP IMMERSION

Exchange programs can have a tremendously positive impact on the U.S. image abroad when done well. Research on Fulbright participants found that 99 percent reported a better understanding the United States and its culture.²⁰ Yet, exchange programs are also aware that they can have the opposite effect. When they fail, they do so for two reasons. First, they fail when motives are purely extractive. Too often, Americans use international communities with little regard for the people who live in them. The business community is often blamed for this type of negative behavior, but it is unfortunately common across all types of exchange. For example, some U.S. college students are taking negative behaviors, such as drinking and vandalism, overseas with them and in the process shoring up “ugly American” stereotypes.

Second, some exchanges can be very thin, with remarkably little interaction taking place between the visitors and local people and communities. In these cases, exchanges are reduced to little more than cultural tours. Effective exchanges hinge on the principle of deep intercultural connections that emerge from doing things for common benefit. Exchanges should bring people together with the goal of creating sustained relationships, understanding, and respect. Hence, good programs often include professional training, local home stays, and community service.

Under thin models of exchange, Americans participating in exchanges do so with little preparation, resulting in culturally thin experiences. Participants make minimal effort to learn local languages or customs, travel in large groups, and act with general disregard for local communities. When they travel, they see local sights through the windows of traveling buses. Far from experiencing another culture deeply and on its own terms, they simply do what they want in a different time zone.

Deep exchange programs are developed to ensure cultural immersion and interaction. Americans are oriented to understand and respect local customs

and encouraged to take responsibility for projecting a positive image of Americans both in inbound and outbound programs. Inbound programs ensure that international visitors spend time immersed in U.S. institutions where they can experience the texture of American life. Outbound providers ensure that Americans become part of the culture by staying with local families, learning languages, and giving back to local communities. Such programs are about creating mutual bonds of understanding and respect.

In a program designed to introduce young Americans to Muslim communities overseas, for example, students live with families and spend time in community-based organizations. Often, these Americans are the first with whom those local community members have interacted to any significant degree. Student participants are briefed in advance on issues of cultural sensitivity, receive basic training within the local language, and are taught to approach their host

The scale of the impact of exchanges tends to be grossly underestimated.

communities with humility, respect, and a desire to listen and learn. A member of one of the Muslim communities once commented that “these young people represent a new face of American society to the people they meet. They present an image much closer to what we have come to see in my visits to the U.S. than what the average person in the Middle East sees and hears about in the media.”²¹ Examples such as this reflect the power of educational and cultural exchanges to serve U.S. public diplomacy interests. When done well, these programs create positive and lasting perceptions; when done poorly, they can reinforce negative stereotypes of Americans and the United States.

EMPOWERING CITIZEN DIPLOMATS

Furthermore, the United States needs to broaden the entire notion of what constitutes an exchange program. In particular, it needs strategies to better support and empower people who are already deeply involved in public diplomacy and exchange, many without even knowing it. Analyst Jerrold Keilson suggests, for example, that the thousands of USAID staff working on hundreds of development projects worldwide could be harnessed to deliver major public diplomacy impact. It would require very small and simple steps, such as ensuring that all training programs and USAID missions have a built-in component or series of events focused on public diplomacy. Every inbound-participant training program should have structured components through which international visitors have opportunities to interact with Americans directly and learn about American culture. Likewise, development projects should include

funds to pay for events that bring together USAID staff and local community members to generate intercultural understanding. The costs would be insignificant relative to the potential impact. Keilson states,

The Americans who work on these projects naturally focus on their management or technical responsibilities, and often pay little or no attention to their potential role as public diplomats. It is natural, since the scope of their work does not call for them to pay attention to public diplomacy, they are not evaluated on their public diplomacy activities, they receive no training in public diplomacy, and there are no funds within the project budget for public diplomat activities.²²

TARGETING THE FUTURE

Finally, to be effective, exchanges should continue to target current and future opinion leaders and influencers. These people need to have the experiences, hear the stories, and learn the facts about the United States that will allow them to shape local opinions in an informed and balanced way. In particular, programs should target the youth, as this group has been historically most influenced by exchanges. There are key moments when people are most likely to be influenced in ways that effect long-term change. From an educator's perspective, those moments tend to take place between the ages of 15 and 25. Now is a key moment to take advantage of this phenomenon. In key regions such as the Middle East, a youth bulge will continue to exist for the next two decades. One in five people living in the Middle East or Northern Africa are between the ages of 18 and 25. Many current exchange programs could be slightly refined to pick up more of this demographic in ways that will have a lasting impact.

What Needs to Be Done

To move forward on this type of agenda, the United States needs to focus on three outcomes: increasing the visibility of exchanges, structuring programs and measuring their impact, and capturing citizen diplomacy moments.

First, the new administration needs to raise the visibility of exchanges as a key component of a new public diplomacy strategy based on authentic dialogue rather than one-way message broadcasts. This would position the American people as the country's greatest asset to promote its values to the world. Despite broad and vocal support for this idea, exchanges are often left out of key documents, alliances, and conversations about public diplomacy. An otherwise interesting 2006 Heritage Foundation report talks about the importance of broadcasting and polling but does not mention citizen exchanges.²³ Exchanges are too often the great idea that people forget to mention, tapped for feel-good stories but not

recognized for their long-term impact in effecting change. Without this type of support, exchanges are likely to remain on the periphery of conversations about how the United States interacts with the rest of the world.

Second, all exchanges should be structured to achieve maximum impact, along the four lines suggested above, while being more diligent about measuring this impact. This does not require a massive infusion of public expenditures; the barriers are as much organizational and operational as they are financial. The challenge is to work across a dispersed community of federal agencies, NGOs, and academic institutions to broadly align efforts around a common set of objectives and standards to evaluate existing programs. To do this, the next administration might focus on a few key areas.

It should work across the higher education community to remove barriers to access and impact, turning universities into portals for citizen diplomacy. Higher education is poised to internationalize in ways that could dramatically increase the number of outbound and inbound exchanges of students, faculty, alumni, and other constituencies. Doing this correctly, however, requires working across a variety of stakeholders, including university administrators, faculty, accrediting agencies, government agencies, and foundations.

Study abroad programs remain largely populated by white liberal arts students from elite colleges. The numbers of black and Hispanic students studying abroad could be increased by removing barriers to students in pre-professional programs such as pre-med, business, engineering, and nursing. These barriers come from how universities construct academic majors and how professional accreditation agencies define standards for entering the professions. Students are increasingly locked into curriculum that is so rigid that they cannot squeeze a semester abroad into their college careers. It is reinforced with financial aid policies and credit systems that are outdated. A related example is the issue of cost. Ironically, more students could study abroad for less money if they were sent to the developing world or to strategically important parts of the Middle East and Asia with large Muslim populations.

In both of these cases, the roadblocks are a range of administrative issues. Administrators should make the curriculum less rigid, especially for students progressing toward professional degrees who will complete a multiyear graduate program before moving into their chosen profession. They should find ways to make financial aid applicable to study abroad programs. Removing the barriers requires convening the right group of stakeholders and keeping them at the table long enough to broker solutions.

Cultural and educational exchanges should be driven by four core principles.

The United States should also develop a mechanism for creating standards and disseminating best practices on citizen diplomacy. Decades of stored knowledge about exchanges is diffused across a huge range of organizations, federal agencies, and associations. A multiyear effort can pull the various exchange communities together to develop standards and collect and disseminate best practices. Much as the Clinton administration did with the President's Council on Sustainable Development, the next administration would benefit from a Council on Citizen Diplomacy that includes exchanges as a key component.

The U.S. needs to broaden the notion of what constitutes an exchange program.

Finally, officials should work across federal agencies to train for citizen diplomacy moments. Every face-to-face interaction across nations and cultures is a potential citizen diplomacy "moment" and needs to be captured, whether it emerges from federal initiatives, international volunteerism, or other forms of outreach. Most branches of the federal government are involved in exchanges without recognizing it. The govern-

ment must ensure that its employees who interact with peers from other countries have the proper training and resources to be effective citizen diplomats.

In addition to these changes, funding is a necessary albeit insufficient condition for getting exchanges right. Every major report on public diplomacy has come to the conclusion that U.S. efforts are woefully underfunded. For example, a November 2007 CSIS report noted that although overall spending on information and educational and cultural affairs has rebounded, "spending has remained at levels below the USIA budgets at the start of the 1990s."²⁴ These investments need to be made wisely. Throwing money at public diplomacy will not work, but a reasonable boost in funding combined with greater focus on and accountability to outcomes could do wonders for U.S. foreign policy objectives.

Each of the above goals calls for a high-level person within the next administration who can serve as an advocate, broker, and facilitator. Even Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy Karen Hughes ran into significant barriers despite her close relationship with the president. Her successor in the next administration will need to continue advocating exchanges while addressing the needs outlined above to establish standards, measure outcomes, and take exchanges to an appropriate scale. If this is to remain the responsibility of the undersecretary, that office will need to be empowered to convene people and organizations, work across disparate groups, and broker change. This will only happen if the next administration sends clear signals that this is a top-level priority.

The American Burden

In 2003, School of Advanced International Studies professor Fouad Ajami wrote that “to come bearing modernism to those who want it but who rail against it at the same time, to represent and embody so much of what the world yearns for and fears—that is the American burden.”²⁵ Part of the challenge of public diplomacy is to help reset the scales of public opinion so that the world sees the positive promise of modernity reflected in the United States and its citizens. Part of this “burden of modernity” is to lead and to influence the choices of nations positively and to care enough to listen to what others have to say.

The task is an important and challenging one but should not be perceived as unachievable. The U.S. image in the world can be restored with a carefully coordinated public diplomacy effort that emphasizes dialogue and exchange and recognizes and effectively utilizes all available resources. The United States is still fundamentally respected and admired across the world by millions of people. The negativity picked up by surveys tends to be more often anger and disappointment than hard-rooted hatred. The image of the United States will change when the messages people hear from it are consistent with its actions and are reinforced by positive experiences and interactions with Americans from all backgrounds.

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