

## Educational Exchange in the Midst of Culture Wars

**A**LTHOUGH HIS WORK WAS HUMANITARIAN RELIEF for an NGO, the Soviets and their Afghan allies would have imprisoned or killed him if they could. He kept on working after the United States abandoned Afghanistan, the Soviets departed, and the country fell into civil war. Once every few months he would sneak into Kabul after dark to visit his family, always leaving before dawn for his safety and theirs. Surely, these experiences would open a culture gap between him and those growing up in the protected environment of the United States. Yet, when I knew this soft-spoken deputy minister in Kabul in 2006 he would reminisce about “Mom and Dad,” the family he lived with when studying in the United States many years ago and with whom he remained in touch through all the hard and bitter years.

This anecdote is a microcosm of the core benefit of exchanges; creating knowledge of our society by members of another who would otherwise see us only through the lens of Hollywood movies and hostile propaganda. My colleague, Thomas Boyatt, has had similar experiences. He notes that in virtually every country where we both served, leadership elements had been to the United States, usually to study, and that experience was of singular importance to them and to their views of the United States. In addition, exchanges bring extra value added in areas of ethnic conflict. In Cyprus, many of our exchange programs were designed to bring Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots together, which would have been very difficult, if not impossible, otherwise. In the Middle East and other conflict areas, U.S. exchange programs provide the first, and sometimes the only, chance for one side to know “the other.”

### **A Steady Decline**

As culture-based struggles have intensified and radicals within Islam have taken the lead in espousing a fundamentally negative view of the West in general, and the United States in particular, we have steadily been giving up one of our most effective tools to rebut this misinformation: educational exchange. This abandonment was part of a broad American disdain for

strong U.S. diplomacy in general, and public diplomacy in particular, that set in after the fall of communism in Europe. Even as world-wide public opinion surveys showed extensive, growing dissatisfaction with many U.S. global policies, and states like China began to assert an influence beyond Asia, our ability to explain ourselves to the world’s citizens declined in every area.

In 2008 the American Academy of Diplomacy in cooperation with the Stimson Center published *The Foreign Affairs Budget of the Future* ([www.academyof-diplomacy.org](http://www.academyof-diplomacy.org)), the first-ever study of resources needed by the State Department and the Agency for International Development (USAID). The project was chaired by then Ambassador Boyatt and the results were shocking. In every field, including particularly public diplomacy and within that field educational exchange, the ability to manage essential work was collapsing.

The decline in our general diplomacy could be seen in the nearly 30 percent of positions that lacked qualified language speakers because officers could not be spared from critical work to spend time in training. It was also apparent in vacant positions around the world (running then at 12 percent worldwide). In the public diplomacy budget of fiscal year 2008, its staff of 1,332 Americans was 24 percent less than the comparable 1986 total of 1,742. Its staff level was down and so were its programs.



## An Essential Role

Educational exchanges are not and need not be confined to government programs but government plays an essential role in making sure poorer countries and non-elites are part of the mix. In 1983 when I left Yemen it was rare to find even a minister with English and a foreign degree. In 1997 when I returned as a deputy assistant Secretary of State, I was impressed by how in ministry after ministry there was a whole senior staff of U.S.-educated technocrats, all trained through U.S. government funding. And then we ended the program. There will not be a successor generation because most Yemenis cannot afford a U.S. education. As terrorism grows in Yemen, we need all the allies we can find.

This is why exchanges need to be part of a broad policy of revitalizing the public diplomacy mission, defined as being: *To understand, inform, engage, and influence global audiences, reaching beyond foreign governments to promote greater appreciation and understanding of U.S. society, culture, institutions, values, and policies.* To do so, public diplomacy needs to cover an employment shortfall, establish additional positions, obtain greater program funding, and significantly expand training.

Educational exchanges are expensive. As budgets shrank, there were ever-growing efforts to find ways to reach people at less cost. The Internet and television were seen as new technologies that could reach millions; so why bother with expensive exchanges? These technologies have their place (see below), but there is a problem with relying solely on them

in societies that historically have learned to distrust their own, government-owned media. They may listen to our music and even some of the news, if they believe it is honest, but tiny sound bites cannot reverse deeply engrained beliefs about the nature of the United States. Living among us can do so.

In Afghanistan we restarted Fulbright and Humphrey fellowships. I hosted these scholars and students on their return. One after another they would tell me of their experiences of living with American families, of the outgoing friendliness of their hosts, and how positive the experiences had been. Each returned grantee became a completely credible witness of America's reality to their extended families, neighbors, and friends. Media placements have a role, but they cannot replace the value of personal contact.

This is why exchanges have always been seen as important by public diplomacy

practitioners in the Department of State who have the responsibility to devise comprehensive strategies, develop content, and select the best communication vehicles for reaching diverse world audiences. The workday for public diplomacy officers, by definition, involves direct communication with the host country. Therefore, public diplomacy personnel and the activities they design, implement, and evaluate are inseparable.

## Recommendations

For this reason, the American Academy of Diplomacy's study recommended major increases in all aspects of public diplomacy, starting with academic exchanges. We at the American Academy of Diplomacy believe the funding for the Fulbright program, along with other major university and private sector exchange programs, should be increased 100 percent over five years.

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**They may listen to our music and even some of the news, if they believe it is honest, but tiny sound bites cannot reverse deeply engrained beliefs about the nature of the United States.**

**Living among us can do so.**

In addition, we recommended increasing the International Visitor program (which brings rising foreign leaders to the United States to become acquainted with professional counterparts and American society) by 50 percent. Lastly, we believe there is a need to increase youth and other exchanges by 25 percent. Instead of leaving foreigners to build their understanding of the United States from movies or propaganda, using exchanges helps to develop a new generation of U.S. experts on China and India and a new generation of Indian and Chinese experts on the United States.

A number of other worthy exchange and scholarship programs that support education abroad by U.S. university students are important complements to those examined in our study. The Academy sees such programs—and others proposed, such as the Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act—as needed parts of a broader public diplomacy

It is time to get back in the exchange business. However, we also need to modernize the ways we connect with the world. To that end our study also recommended that a number of other programs be expanded.

American cultural centers once provided many of the world's poorest students their first book or uncensored newspaper. Senior officials from Yemen to Afghanistan and from Colombia to Luxembourg—exchanges are important in developed countries as well—have told us over the years about the wonder of their early use of the old United States Information Agency's old libraries. In Latin America, Boyatt notes, "the libraries were the main element in the Bi-National Centers that thrived all over the continent. As the name implies, the Centers (libraries) were managed by boards composed of equal representation from both the U.S. and the local country." This collaborative feature contributed a great deal to the integration of the centers into the local scenes. For many this contact was the first step that led to later exchanges. Those libraries are largely gone, in a few cases burned by mobs, and in many cases abandoned for financial reasons.

Cultural centers can still have a role in providing public diplomacy field personnel with excellent opportunities to engage

college students and young professionals in discussions of U.S. society and policies. Not every country has the security or the bilateral relationship to make a center possible but some do. We believe that the time is right to revive the American cultural center concept in those countries where the local security situation permits and the program environment warrants. We recommended 40 centers, each with a library facility, computer access, English language instruction, student counseling, and cultural programming.

The United States is the world's technology leader, but we have fallen badly behind in how we communicate with the world. Increases are needed in programs, which include the www.America.gov Web site's Arabic, Chinese, and Persian languages; enhancing the capacity of a Digital Outreach Team to engage particularly with Arab audiences in Web chat-room discussions on U.S. policy; the High Tech Hub, which uses multimedia-unified packages to attract a broad and technologically savvy audience on issues of democracy, free economics, and human rights; and the Global Strategic Engagement Center, a joint State Department–Defense Department effort to circulate timely guidance countering terrorist groups' propaganda. In the competitive world of attracting viewers to Web sites, the United States needs to promote its Web sites on major search engines such as Google and Yahoo.

We would supplement these programs with increases in so-called bi-national centers abroad devoted to English language instruction, cultural and information programs on the United States, and developing ties with the United States. We believe that the program of sending expert speakers on important U.S. foreign and domestic policy themes for talks to foreign audiences should be expanded by an additional 100 speakers. These and some other technical

and program innovations detailed in our report, such as expanding Middle Eastern and European television and radio media hubs in London, Dubai, and Brussels to complement the local embassy public affairs efforts, would reinvigorate American public diplomacy and deliver the full value from a revitalized exchange program.

## **The Real Costs of Failure to Communicate**

These programs will not run themselves. We have carefully calculated the increases needed in staffing and what that will cost. We have also examined shortages and gaps in existing public diplomacy programs that need to be remedied. We believe it is the precision of these calculations that distinguishes our study from many other policy recommendations. Based on this work, we calculate that to run all the programs described above would require an increase in permanent American staffing by 487, as well as adding a further 369 Locally employed staff (that is, residents of the foreign countries). The cost for all aspects of programs and personnel would total \$610.4 million a year once the full program was in place. Avoiding a single terrorist incident would easily repay this investment.

U.S. citizens need to communicate with Congress about the importance of exchanges and all forms of diplomacy. When the budget knives come out again in Congress, as they always do, and when cutting diplomacy and public diplomacy in particular looks easy because few constituents yell about the subject, it will be important for U.S. citizens to remember the real costs of failure to communicate—and to help their representatives remember as well. **IE**

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*Author's Note: Thomas D. Boyatt provided valuable assistance with the preparation of this article. Boyatt was ambassador to Upper Volta and Colombia. He was decorated for heroism for his actions to protect U.S. citizens during the first aircraft hijacking of an American aircraft.*