



SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

In February 2009, the United States Institute of Peace hosted a daylong conference, “Media as Global Diplomat,” that explored the changing orientation of public diplomacy and the importance of international cross-cultural exchange to public diplomacy. This report explores how access to international study and cultural exchange could be broadened by combining new media with established processes and pedagogy for cross-cultural engagement.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Sheldon Himelfarb and Shamil Idriss

Exchange 2.0

Summary

- The orientation of U.S. public diplomacy is changing from telling America’s story to direct dialogue in an interconnected world.
- With this shift has come a need to revitalize a core pillar of public diplomacy strategy: international exchanges.
- Although traditional exchange programs have been effective in expanding access to cross-cultural educational opportunities beyond those that study-abroad programs reach, participation remains limited.
- Developing the next generation of Exchange 2.0 initiatives—that is, technology-enabled programs embedded in curricula and with a cross-cultural educational purpose—will improve the number, diversity, and experience of international exchange participants.

Introduction

International cross-cultural exchange is critical for both public diplomacy and ensuring that young people have the skills they need to operate in an increasingly interdependent world. But these opportunities are accessible to only a few.

It is essential that all available tools are used to enable international cross-cultural educational opportunities. Access to international study and educational and cultural exchange could be broadened considerably by combining new media tools and platforms with well-established processes and pedagogy for deep cross-cultural engagement. Under such a scenario, it is entirely possible that within fifteen years it will be the norm for young people to have a profound international cross-cultural educational experience as part of their curriculum. With this approach, international exchanges could also become an even more vital and effective element of U.S. public diplomacy.

The State of International Exchange

International study and educational and cultural exchanges that involve people meeting face to face are widely acknowledged as being among the best ways to foster cross-cultural

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MAY 2011

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan institution established and funded by Congress. Its goals are to help prevent and resolve violent conflicts, promote postconflict peacebuilding, and increase conflict management tools, capacity, and intellectual capital worldwide. The Institute does this by empowering others with knowledge, skills, and resources, as well as by its direct involvement in conflict zones around the globe.

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respect and understanding. Major programs such as Fulbright,¹ Erasmus,² AFS, YFU, and Rotary have helped make it possible for hundreds of thousands of young people to study internationally, and have helped equip them with needed cross-cultural communication and engagement skills. Exchanges can be among the most profound and inspiring events in a young person's life regardless of the ultimate career path. Those who have just completed them are a tremendous—and often untapped—resource for mobilization in support of greater cross-cultural understanding and dialogue.

As valuable as these programs are, however, they have some limitations. First, they reach too few students. Fewer than 2 percent of Americans enrolled in higher education engage in study-abroad programs each year (approximately 260,000 in 2008–09), and only 4 percent of the higher education population in the United States are international students (approximately 700,000 in 2009–10). The number of study-abroad participants is similar in many European countries, fewer than 2 percent.³

The cost of study-abroad programs is another limiting factor. The least expensive program is \$4,000 per student, and many cost ten times this amount. Thus, access to study abroad has traditionally been limited to those with fairly substantial means or access to aid. This in turn limits the diversity of the candidate pool and the access of low-income students.

In recent years, donors and administrators of international exchange programs have made significant efforts to address the issue of cost and expand access to education abroad. Notably, the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program has awarded more than 8,800 study-abroad scholarships to U.S. undergraduates with financial need since its inception in 2001.⁴ The Fulbright Program has expanded its outreach to a broad array of institutions and to students with diverse backgrounds.⁵ However, there is still more work to be done, particularly in an international context.

A third issue is that the most common destinations for study abroad are geographically concentrated, which means that they tend to miss areas of the world where the need for deeper understanding is greatest. Consider the following examples:

- In both proportion of exchanges and funds spent, the most popular region for American students is Europe and the least popular regions are the Middle East and North Africa.⁶
- International students in the United States tend to be concentrated in particular states and cities.⁷
- The number of European students who participate in the intra-European program Erasmus is significantly greater than those in Erasmus Mundus, which promotes exchange between Europe and the rest of the world.⁸
- Sponsored exchanges have gone a long way to address these trends. Geographically targeted scholarships such as the Boren Scholarships and Fellowships have helped to diversify the languages and cultures that Americans are exposed to through international study.⁹ However, many students still choose to study in languages and cultures that are similar to their own, and more will need to be done to foster cross-cultural understanding among a much broader range of the student population in the United States and around the world.
- Finally, those traveling abroad to study tend to be self-selected; they are already on the path to seeking out and exploring diverse cultures when they enroll in study-abroad programs or apply to funded exchange programs. There is a need, therefore, to introduce larger numbers and more diverse groups of young people to the valuable lessons to be learned from cross-cultural dialogues.

Educational Exchange in a Changing World

The context within which exchanges are taking place has changed profoundly. Over the past decade, these developments have prompted serious rethinking about the role of exchanges, especially as they relate to public diplomacy.

Recognition is growing that not only presidents and politicians determine whether we live in a safe and secure world; citizens, activists, and nonstate actors also do. The skills, character, and knowledge required to be a responsible and constructive leader in a globalized world therefore need to be cultivated across ever broader segments of society. Further, because it is increasingly imperative that citizens have global and linguistic competency (if they are to succeed in the twenty-first-century framework), all young people need opportunities to gain these skills. Our collective ability to solve complex global problems requires that many more people be exposed to the learning and knowledge that international exchange programs offer.

The orientation of public diplomacy is also changing. Throughout much of history, U.S. public diplomacy has focused on “telling America’s story,” with an emphasis on controlling and disseminating messages from one source to multiple audiences. But today, public diplomacy practitioners are talking more about the role of dialogue, and how to develop both better listening skills and a better understanding of how culture and identity define those with whom the United States is interacting.¹⁰ To date, U.S. administrations on both sides of the political spectrum have acknowledged the value of international exchanges in helping achieve these goals.

Educational Exchange 2.0

Technology-enabled international cross-cultural educational exchange offers a scalable, cost-effective, and sustainable way of addressing many of the challenges and leveraging many of the opportunities described and puts meaningful dialogue with young people around the globe within reach of every young American. Online engagement cannot, and should not, replace traditional exchanges and the institutions that administer them. Such face-to-face programs are still the optimal way for people to connect with each other across geographic and cultural boundaries. What technology-enabled international dialogue programs do is complement, and even strengthen, the benefits derived from in-person programs in several ways:

- *Expand the applicant pool.* Exchange 2.0 can provide the opportunity to engage in a cross-cultural exchange experience for students who may otherwise be limited by finances, age, concerns about physical security, or other constraints.¹¹
- *Spark new interest in cross-cultural exchange.* Web-enabled exchange can increase interest in or reduce tentativeness toward international study.¹² According to a study by East Carolina University—which through its Global Understanding Course connects institutions through videoconferencing technology—students who have such an experience are more likely to participate in physical exchanges later in life.¹³ iEARN, working on the K-12 level, has found similar data and examples. ExchangesConnect is an open international online community administered by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, where members can connect with “prospective, current, and former exchange participants and share informal tips.”¹⁴
- *Better prepare students for the challenges of in-person exchanges.* Cross-cultural exchange is not inevitably positive. If those who travel abroad are culturally insensitive and misinformed, relationships may be hindered rather than advanced.¹⁵ Participating in technology-enabled cross-cultural awareness training before traveling abroad allows students to develop a base of knowledge about other cultures that may dispel any stereotypes and enhance the quality of face-to-face exchanges. Online Fulbright Teacher exchange courses are a good and particularly germane example. Zhen Zhai, for instance, spent 2005 and 2006 teaching Chinese to students at Montana’s Carroll College as a Fulbright language teaching

assistant. “As a curious traveler and avid photographer,” he explained, “I took thousands of pictures in the U.S. Putting them online and maintaining a blog, I encouraged my friends and students back home to see the country through my own lens and discuss my observations with me.”¹⁶

- *Facilitate partnerships with key institutions abroad.* One deterrent to American and European students studying abroad in the Middle East and North Africa has to do with academic credits.¹⁷ Some technology-enabled exchange programs allow much-needed interaction without requiring accreditation to be resolved or satisfied. For instance, the courses at some of the universities that participate in Soliya’s Connect Program (that is, in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, or rural areas of Egypt) would not qualify for academic credit if a student at a U.S.-based institution were to seek to register and enroll. Through the Connect Program, these students learn together with—and from—their peers at these institutions, and vice versa.
- *Embed the virtues of exchange with ongoing contact.* Sponsored exchanges can leverage the investment by enabling participants to remain engaged, continue to enhance their language abilities and cultural understanding, and share their experiences with a broader audience. The U.S. State Department, for example, maintains the “Fulbright Community on State Alumni,” which provides an online space for current and former Fulbrighters to “share and discuss their experiences and work with a global audience.”¹⁸

Operating Models

As noted earlier, technology-enabled international exchange programs are not new, but instead woefully untapped. A review of the field yielded several examples of programs specifically aimed at promoting intercultural understanding—but which still occur on a relatively small scale. The five programs that follow are illustrative.

Soliya’s Connect Program (www.soliya.net)

Since 2003, Soliya—a global nonprofit network—has used new media technologies to foster cross-cultural understanding at the university level. Connect Program participants use customized videoconferencing technology to have a dialogue directly with their peers from around the world and engage in candid discussions of cross-cultural issues. Their interaction is rooted in a curriculum designed to supplement accredited coursework. Small groups of eight to ten students are guided through a ten-week program by pairs of trained facilitators. The explicit focus is on connecting students from the West with those in the Arab and Muslim world and on maximizing impact along four learning metrics: empathy, cross-cultural communication skills, critical thinking, and activation (or pursuit of further cross-cultural engagement). These four metrics are identified as the key to most closely approximating—in the online space—the impact of physical exchanges. Facilitators are young leaders from more than twenty-five countries. To prepare these facilitators, Soliya offers a 24-hour facilitation training course via its Web-conferencing application. The training provides facilitators with transferable collaborative leadership and conflict resolution skills they can use in both Soliya’s programs and other contexts at local, regional, and global levels.

iEARN (<http://iearn.org>)

iEARN (International Education and Resource Network) is a nonprofit organization, launched in 1988, with more than 40,000 member educators and youth organizations in more than 130 countries. iEARN daily engages two million youth (ages 5 to 19) in virtual exchanges

in which teachers and students enter online venues to meet one another and get involved in collaborative educational projects, using more than fifty languages and various kinds of multimedia interfaces. Such projects include youth from diverse communities collaborating on curriculum-based projects in science, math, history, music, economics, entrepreneurship, and family life. They can also focus on environmental topics, such as endangered species or deforestation. As a virtual community with local country centers, iEARN provides professional development and Ministry of Education support in a safe online environment. iEARN has partnered with the U.S. State Department's Global Connections & Exchange Program, which has linked more than 2,500 schools with nearly 100,000 students in countries with significant Muslim populations—both to collaborate on social action projects and to offer professional development to teachers. iEARN also creates hybrid models that provide online platforms for physical exchange participants in the YES program of the State Department. The Adobe Youth Voices program brings the private sector into collaborative virtual exchanges. With 80 percent of its participants from lower-income communities and less-developed countries, iEARN has extensive experience in bridging technology and socioeconomic gaps.

Global Nomads Group (www.gng.org)

Established in 1998, Global Nomads Group (GNG) is an international NGO that creates interactive programs for young people around the world. By exploring the similarities and differences that define who we are, GNG programs provide the opportunities to build bridges and foster meaningful dialogue through collaborative global projects. In its twelve-year history, GNG has conducted programs in more than forty-five countries on all seven continents, and reached more than one million young people. GNG's strategy is to engage and empower young people worldwide using media including live-interactive videoconferencing, streaming video, social networking, gaming, documentaries, and participatory filmmaking. Using these tools, GNG creates opportunities for local, regional, and global collaboration and communication. One such program connected children who survived the earthquake in Haiti with their counterparts who survived Hurricane Katrina in the United States, which led the majority of the American survivors to organize themselves to donate to their peers in Haiti.

East Carolina University's Global Understanding Program (www.ecu.edu/cs-acad/globalinitiatives/course.cfm)

Based in ECU's state-of-the-art Global Classroom, this program provides a format for students to learn about other cultures through live videoconferencing and chat technology. The online description explains the program this way: "Institutions are partnered in pairs so that only two cultures meet at any one time. . . . Students discuss topics ranging from college life, family, the meaning of life, to stereotypes and prejudices. Each class session includes discussion in both small groups and one-to-one chat with reflective journaling afterwards. . . . Students begin to see similarities among themselves, see positives in others, and to de-emphasize the negative differences. This realization is key to changing negative stereotypes and understanding other cultures. Through learning about other cultures, students begin to understand their own culture and gain a broader perspective on life."

These are just the most prominent examples that emerged from a scan of the field. Although promising, they are still relatively young; they need additional careful review in order to distill their experience and improve our understanding of what works, what doesn't work, and why.

Much innovative work around intercultural understanding is being done in more niche settings—either using specialized platforms or aiming at specific audiences. For example, Second Life offers a virtual 3-D environment in which students from different countries can interact—such as students from Dubai Women’s College who met with a group of Korean students—to practice English, tour each other’s campuses, and learn about each other’s culture.¹⁹ The NGO Digital Democracy also has Project Einstein, a photography-based digital pen pal program that connects youth in refugee camps with resettled refugees and their classmates in the United States. To date, they have worked with refugee youth in Haiti, Bangladesh, South Africa, Thailand, and Burma. In neither case, however, have the programs for intercultural dialogue reached the steady state and scale of the first five programs mentioned.

Several questions are particularly important to consider:

- What is an effective target age range for participants?
- What should the duration of these programs be?
- What specific demographics should these programs target to maximize impact?
- Do technology-enabled exchanges require facilitators, and if so, how much training do these facilitators require?
- How essential is it for exchanges to be synchronous (real time)?
- What kinds of curricula enable technology-enabled programs to most closely approximate the learning achieved by traditional exchanges?
- What professional development is required to enable educators to integrate online global exchanges into their curriculum areas?

The final question, on all of these points, is where the ideal solution meets with the currently possible, given issues of infrastructure (which include Internet connectivity and bandwidth), institutional capacity and relationships, and navigation of language differences across cultures.

Conclusion

These questions are difficult to answer in light of the still relatively few programs dedicated to technology-enabled intercultural exchanges. Regardless, significant training and resources will be needed to enable educational institutions to dramatically expand their work in this area. To this end, we recommend a public-private partnership that would bring together industry practitioners, governments, and other experts on distance education to pursue the following challenges:

- Share views on how cross-cultural exchange programs can be scaled up with Web-enabled technologies.
- Assess hardware and software capabilities and needs.
- Share best practices on innovative educational models using new media tools.
- Advocate for grant programs through which educational institutions (universities, high schools) can apply for resources to integrate online cross-cultural educational programs into their curricula, and others—such as Soliya, iEARN, and Global Nomads Group—can expand their efforts.
- Develop an open source clearinghouse or repository of valuable information about cross-cultural exchange and education programs.

Notes

1. The Fulbright Program, developed in 1946, is now considered the government's flagship international exchange program. As of 2010, more than 300,000 people from more than 155 countries had participated. See http://us.fulbrightonline.org/about_programhistory.html.
2. The Erasmus Programme is an intra-European effort established in the late 1980s. More than 4,000 higher education institutions in thirty-three countries and more than 2.2 million students participate today. Erasmus Mundus, its international counterpart, was created in 2003. See http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/doc1709_en.htm and http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus_mundus/programme/documents/2010/guide_emapr10_el.pdf.
3. There is no comprehensive statistic on the number of U.S. students in higher education who study abroad. The estimate of fewer than 2 percent is based on available data: a National Center for Education Statistics report that 19.6 million students were enrolled in U.S. higher education during the 2008–09 school year, and the Institute of International Education's 2010 Open Doors report that 260,327 American students (1.32 percent) were studying abroad during that time. The Open Doors report, however, includes only those students enrolled in a degree-granting institution of higher education who received academic credit for study abroad. See "Open Doors 2010 fast facts," <http://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Publications/~media/Files/Corporate/Open-Doors/Special-Reports/Fast-Facts-2010.ashx>; Laura G. Knapp, Janice E. Kelly-Reid, and Scott A. Ginder, "Enrollment in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2008; Graduation Rates, 2002 and 2005 Cohorts; and Financial Statistics, Fiscal Year 2008" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2010152rev>. See also Rajika Bhandari and Patricia Chow, *Open Doors 2009: Report on International Educational Exchange* (New York: Institute of International Education, 2009); Daniel Obst, Rajika Bhandari, and Sharon Witherell, *Current Trends in U.S. Study Abroad & the Impact of Strategic Diversity of Initiatives* (New York: Institute of International Education, 2007).
4. The Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship provides Pell Grant recipients the opportunity to participate in study-abroad programs worldwide. See <http://www.iie.org/gilman>.
5. See the IIE Annual Report for 2009, <http://www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/iie/ar2009/#/6>; *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Fulbright Puts Money Where Problems Are," <http://chronicle.com/article/Fulbrights-Putting-Money/125053/>.
6. Fifty-six percent of American students studying abroad go to Europe, 6 percent to Africa, and fewer than 1 percent to the Middle East. Even among those who do study in the Middle East, geographic concentration in destination is substantial: 70 percent in Israel, and the majority of the rest in Egypt, Morocco, or Jordan. See Bhandari and Chow, *Open Doors 2009*; Robert Gutierrez, Amy Hawthorne, Mary Kirk, and Christopher Powers, *Expanding U.S. Study Abroad in the Arab World: Challenges and Opportunities* (New York: Institute of International Education, 2009).
7. Ten states hosted 61 percent of all international students in the United States in 2008–09, and large cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Washington, DC, and Chicago in particular tend to attract them. In addition, the majority of these international students study at large doctoral institutions. See Bhandari and Chow, *Open Doors 2009*.
8. During the 2008–09 school year, 198,568 European students participated in the Erasmus Programme, and some 2,000 worldwide participated in Erasmus Mundus. See "Erasmus Student Mobility 2008/09," *Erasmus Statistics*, <http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/doc/stat/table109.pdf> and "Statistics by Country, 2004–05 to 2008–09," http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus_mundus/results_compendia/documents/statistics/emtotal20042009_students.xls.
9. Boren Scholarships and Fellowships, funded by the National Security Education Program, focus on geographic areas, languages, and fields of study critical to U.S. national security (broadly defined) and underrepresented in study abroad. Since inception, the program has awarded scholarships and fellowships to study more than 100 languages in more than 100 countries. See <http://www.borenawards.org/>, http://www.alliance-exchange.org/sites/default/files/8_NSEP_2011_FINAL.pdf.
10. For more on this topic, see <http://www.american.edu/sis/ic/2010-Cultural-Diplomacy-Conference.cfm>.
11. Cost is one of the biggest barriers to cross-cultural exchange. Safety is another. Gutierrez and his colleagues note in *Expanding U.S. Study Abroad* that this is perceived as a particular problem in terms of study abroad in the Arab world. Additionally, the 2010 British Council report on Muslim youth exchange in Europe points out that gender segregation is a significant barrier to international exchange for Muslim women. Web-enabled exchange may be a viable alternative in such circumstances.
12. Students may be tentative about going abroad for fear of stereotypes. According to the 2010 British Council report on Muslim youth exchange in Europe, anxiety about Islamophobia limits the number of Muslims who engage in exchange. Similarly, Americans or Europeans may avoid studying abroad in places like the Arab world for fear of anti-Americanism or anti-Westernism. Web-enabled exchange may reduce these anxieties, increasing the likelihood of future physical exchange.
13. Rosina C. Chia, Elmer Poe, and Karl L. Wuensch, "Attitude Change after Taking a Virtual Global Understanding Course," *International Journal of Human and Social Sciences* 4, no. 2 (2009): 75–79.
14. ExchangesConnect, "Getting Started," U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, <http://connect.state.gov/page/getting-started>.
15. Gutierrez and his colleagues report that professors and administrators at Arab universities tended to feel that international students are not well informed about Arab culture before they arrive (*Expanding U.S. Study Abroad*).
16. U.S. Department of State, "Fulbright by Country: Zheng Zhai, Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant from China," <http://fulbright.state.gov/participating-countries/east-asia-and-the-pacific/china/zheng.html>.
17. Gutierrez et al., *Expanding U.S. Study Abroad*.
18. U.S. Department of State, "State Alumni: Online Community," <http://fulbright.state.gov/alumni/state-alumni>.
19. Tom Peter, "Study Abroad through Second Life: Virtual College Campuses Host International Student Exchanges," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 2, 2008.

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Of Related Interest

- *Afghanistan Media Assessment* by Eran Fraenkel, Emrys Schoemaker, and Sheldon Himelfarb (Peaceworks, December 2010)
- *Make It Theirs: The Imperative of Local Ownership in Communications and Media Initiatives* by Simon Haselock (Special Report, October 2010)
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