The Impact of International Exchange Programs

Exchanges are an essential element in our smart power strategy to maintain and strengthen U.S. global leadership. Exchanges enhance U.S. national security and prosperity by building personal connections, mutual understanding, and productive partnerships that help us address critical global issues: managing the world economy, combating terrorism and regional conflicts, and dealing with environmental, public health, and humanitarian challenges.

As recent world events amply demonstrate, a strong military alone is not sufficient to maintain our national security. We need to engage with the world across a wide variety of activities and issues, building respect and a web of partnerships based on shared interests. Exchanges are also an investment in the future, expanding the vision of current and emerging leaders. As exchange participants and as hosts, American citizens gain vital exposure to the world and opportunities to develop expertise in critical languages and in international societies and cultures.

Virtually all of the money appropriated for exchanges is spent either in the United States or on American citizens who travel overseas. U.S. airlines, academic institutions, hotels, and small businesses in communities throughout the nation benefit from exchange dollars. Exchanges support jobs in all these sectors, as well as in the vibrant U.S. NGO community. Comprehensive U.S. global leadership in a wired, interdependent world requires a substantial cohort of Americans who not only understand public policy, economics, science, or medicine, but who also have the skills and knowledge to navigate effectively across cultures. It further requires foreign leaders who understand and appreciate American society and values.

The State Department’s diverse exchange programs allow us to reach Americans and foreign participants at different stages of their lives, and to provide exchange experiences to individuals in a broad range of sectors: students, scholars and teachers, professionals, national and local government leaders, business executives, journalists, scientists, and NGO leaders.

As Ann Stock, Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs, said at the Alliance’s 2011 Membership Meeting: “Simply put, people-to-people exchanges are, without question, the most effective tool we have for implementing smart power. Exchanges foster people-to-people connections among an impressive range of audiences—not just elites…When our students go abroad and engage with their peers, they acquire critical language skills and enhance our nation’s global competitiveness.”

Studies conducted by the Department of State repeatedly demonstrate the effectiveness of exchange programs:

Exchanges Increase Mutual Understanding

Exchange programs enhance participants’ understanding of culture, government, and economy in their host country and create positive opinions that can last a lifetime:

- 98% of Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program respondents reported that their Fulbright experiences gave them a deeper understanding of the United States, while 93% believed their experiences heightened their awareness of social and cultural diversity among different nations.
- 97% of International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) alumni respondents agreed that the program develops friendly and peaceful relations between the United States and other countries.
Alumni of the **FREEDOM Support Act Undergraduate Program** believe that they have a much better understanding of U.S. politics (95%), culture (100%), and economics (89%) as a result of the program.

98% of **Humphrey Fellows** reported a significantly increased and more balanced understanding of American practices and culture. 94% reported the same of the U.S. government and its policies.

**Exchanges Create International Partnerships**
Participants in international exchange programs often maintain their friendships and professional relationships after they return home. These relationships extend the impact of exchanges and foster productive international collaboration on key issues:

- 81% of **Humphrey Fellows** maintain both professional and personal contact with people in the United States and with other Fellows.
- 75% of **U.S. Fulbright Scholars** have continued to collaborate with host country or institution colleagues since completing their grants.

**Exchanges Foster Democracy and Social Change**
Many exchange visitors to the U.S. return to their home countries with a greater understanding of democracy. These participants are more likely to apply these principles at home and engage in democratic and open practices:

- Nearly all **Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX)** Program alumni reported visiting historical sites during their stay (98%) and many reported that the most important concepts they learned about during their FLEX experience were American freedom and equal rights.
- After participating in the Kennedy-Lugar **Youth Exchange and Study (YES)** Program, more than 90% of respondents (all from predominantly Muslim countries) recognized the importance of individual rights such as freedom of religion, access to information, and equality under the law.
- **FREEDOM Support Undergraduate** alumni are significantly more likely to support equal rights for all citizens (74%). Alumni are less likely to condone the paying of bribes (73%) and less likely to believe it is justifiable to avoid paying taxes (6%).

**Exchanges Improve Leadership Capabilities**
Participants of exchange programs often become leaders in government or in their fields:

- 94% of surveyed participants in the Kennedy-Lugar **Youth Exchange and Study (YES)** program say their leadership skills improved as a result of their exchange experience.
- The **International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP)** has brought nearly 200,000 key business, political, and civil society leaders from around the world to meet with counterparts and citizens across the United States. IVLP alumni include Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, and more than 320 other current and former chiefs of state.

**Exchanges Enhance Professional Development**
Exchange programs often increase general knowledge and help develop skills that enhance participants’ careers either directly or indirectly:

- 95% of **Hubert Humphrey Fellows** returned home with substantive new knowledge, skills, and abilities leading to the integration of technology into the workplace and adoption of new management practices.
- **Edmund S. Muskie Fellowship** alumni reported increased self-confidence, increased ability to overcome difficulties, increased communication skills, a broadened outlook, and increased tolerance as a result of the program.

*Data Source: Department of State Evaluations (http://exchanges.state.gov/programevaluations/completed.html)*