

# Building Bridges

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People-to-people exchanges, such as those sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), are a vital component of our national security strategy and perhaps our most

valuable public diplomacy asset. Many exchange participants report that they are “forever changed” by their direct involvement with the American people. Considering that more than 230 current and former heads of state and government are alumni of ECA programs, the State Department has a tremendous opportunity to reach the leaders of tomorrow through exchanges and expose them to how democratic values animate our thinking and our society.

We have made it a priority to engage with previously underrepresented communities, be they youth or those who influence youth—women, teachers, religious leaders, and media figures.

## Education

Recently in Cairo, where I met with exchange alumni, embassy staff, and program participants, we announced a new Community College Scholarship Exchange Initiative. This program, a State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development partnership, will bring to the United States 1,000 Egyptian vocational students and a significant number of faculty and administrators. The students will receive training leading to professional

certificates and associate degrees in computer and other fields of study, enabling the United States to reach out to Egyptian youth and help them to gain self-esteem by gaining the skills to enter the Egyptian workforce.

I also had the opportunity in Cairo to visit with some extraordinary 12- to 15-year-olds, benefiting from our English ACCESS Microscholarship program. This initiative is the cornerstone of our pledge to help young people on the margins of society. The girls and boys who receive these ACCESS Microscholarships for English study will not only receive an important communication and economic tool, but will also gain a sense of hope and self-confidence to become candidates of our exchange programs and future leaders of their societies. This year, more than 10,000 students will benefit from ACCESS.

The Community College and ACCESS programs are just two components of a much broader strategy to bring together international education and America’s national interest. In January 2006, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings co-hosted a summit with leaders of U.S. higher education to jump-start a partnership to strengthen international education. The summit initiated a broad dialogue on the need for the U.S. government to work collaboratively with the nongovernmental sector on the future of U.S. higher education in a global arena.

To this end, we launched the first ever Fulbright International Science and Technology award, to bring the most talented students from abroad to the United States for Ph.D. study in science and technology fields. The program is designed to showcase U.S. leadership in science and technology and to demonstrate that the United States continues to welcome international students in those fields.

Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings and I led a delegation of 12 American university presidents on a tour to China, Japan, and Korea. Our purpose was to highlight the United States as the destination of choice for talented

foreign students and to underscore the desire of the U.S. government and American colleges and universities to collaborate with our counterparts abroad. Other high-level delegations are being planned to our key markets around the world.

Secretary Rice has stressed that America is understood best through a dialogue, not a monologue. This theme fits perfectly with the mission of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, where mutual understanding is the foundation of everything we do. And in our programming, we can never underestimate the need to educate America's citizens through exchange programs.

President Bush, who attended the opening of the University Presidents Summit, clearly underlined our mandate and the need to serve our citizens when he announced the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) at the summit. NSLI is an interagency initiative of the Departments of State, Education, and Defense, and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, designed to increase the number of Americans learning critical-need foreign languages.

These institutes—some sponsored by Academic Programs and some by Youth Exchange—were held in Jordan, Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt, Turkey, China, Bangladesh, and India (for both Hindi and Urdu).

### **Sports, Culture, and the Arts**

We also recognize the important role played by sports, culture, and the arts in bringing people together. The arts and sports create common understanding that transcends language and borders.

First Lady Laura Bush helped us launch ECA's Global Cultural Initiative (GCI) in September 2006. GCI is designed to enhance the department's capabilities in the performing and visual arts through collaboration with the private sector. Our initial partnerships include the Kennedy Center, the American Film Institute, and the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities.

Secretary Rice also named Olympic skater and U.S. champion Michelle Kwan as our first American Public Diplomacy Envoy. Michelle's story brings American values to life. She recently made her first trip to China.

Michelle also represents the strength of American women and, by example, the potential that all women, especially those living under oppressive conditions, have to realize their dreams. I believe very strongly as an immigrant myself in the power of the American dream

to encourage individuals everywhere to realize their full potential.

### **Women**

That is why I have given a high priority to creating new programs to empower women around the world. We know that educating women and including them in all aspects of society is the only way for a modern society to flourish.

We are working to empower women through the *Fortune*/State Department International Women's Exchange Program, a public-private partnership that brings young women business leaders from around the world to mentor with some of our top female executives. Just last year the chief executive officers of Xerox, Avon, and Time Inc., and the top vice president of Microsoft, were involved in this successful initiative.

### **Journalists**

Journalists, unlike women business leaders, have been participants in ECA exchange programs for many years. However, never before this past year had we considered journalists as a single, global community in program terms. We invented another public-private partnership for this purpose and named the program after former U.S. Information Agency director and esteemed American journalist Edward R. Murrow. We did this because his name stands for journalistic integrity.

Some 140 journalists from every region of the world participated in the largest gathering of professional exchange participants ever mounted. Seven American schools of journalism donated their expertise, facilities, and resources to host the participants during their three-week program. They interacted with American colleagues and journalism students and professors.

At the closing symposium, one of the participants approached me with an interesting observation. Several of the participants had been critical of the Bush administration. He asked me in total disbelief how we could allow such criticism to be voiced in a government building in front of outside guests. I replied: "That is what freedom of speech is all about." That lesson, hammered in many different ways over time, is so vital to the defense and, indeed, growth of freedom and democracy around the world.

Exchanges are about building relationships that change attitudes and open minds.



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Van Stokes (left), the head of the U.S. freestyle wrestling team, which was sent to Iran by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, and an unidentified Iranian watch the match between American wrestler Zach Roberson (in red) and Iranian Mehdi Rahimi during a tournament in Bandar Abbas, Iran, in January 2007.

## Iran

There are few relationships more sensitive and more critical to the United States than that with Iran. ECA has been asked by Secretary Rice to play a vital role, and we are doing so.

In November 2006, ECA's International Visitor office hosted the first group of Iranian visitors since 1979 on a three-week medical exchange program. Sixteen medical professionals from Iran participated in a symposium hosted jointly by the Aspen Institute and the State Department that focused on cardiovascular, cancer, and infectious diseases. This program was a great success—in a long tradition of successful use of exchanges to build bridges where few or none exist.

The Iranians came to the United States with serious apprehensions and misinformation; but they returned to Iran much better informed about U.S. society, culture, institutions, and medical care. A young doctor explained that the trip had reunited him with his “American brothers and sisters after a separation that has lasted much too long.”

We currently have eight Iranian Foreign Language Teaching Assistants helping American youth better understand the language and the culture of the Iranian people. We fully anticipate expanding this program in partnership with Iranian universities.

We are working on several additional exchange programs with Iran for 2007, including an exchange between USAWrestling and the Iranian Wrestling Federation.

The wonderful thing about bridges, and that is what exchange programs really are, is that you can cross in both directions. Thus we will all benefit from the positive change that public diplomacy will foster through people-to-people exchange programs. ■

*<http://exchanges.state.gov/>*