

Educational Exchanges with Islamic Countries

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Events since September 11, 2001, have dramatically illustrated the misunderstanding that exists between citizens of Islamic countries and citizens of the United States. Recognizing this problem as a threat to peace and security, several U.S. legislators have called for additional funding for exchanges between the U.S. and Islamic countries. Proposed legislation has a strong likelihood of approval in some form according to Christina West, Assistant Director for International Affairs, NASULGC.

Diverse exchanges have demonstrated the effectiveness of private citizens in representing their countries and promoting understanding. Case studies and evaluations of the International Farm (now 4-H) Youth Exchange, ACIDI/VOCA's farmer to farmer program, American Field Service and Rotary high school exchanges, university study abroad and Peace Corps, all provide evidence of positive impact. How the exchanges are organized and implemented, however, appears to fundamentally affect their degree of success in promoting understanding.

Method

Review of literature and interviews with exchange participants were used to generate hypotheses. The carousel discussion will be used to test the hypotheses and brainstorm innovative approaches for organizing proposed exchanges with Islamic countries.

Major Points

- Exchanges must have a strong, parallel structure in both sending and receiving countries.
- The purpose of the exchange must be clear and collaboratively determined.
- Recruitment, selection, orientation, supervision, and debriefing (reentry) must be carefully planned and implemented for both the travelers and host families (or institutions).
- Insurance, official documents, rules and evacuation procedures must be sound and practical.
- Flexibility in administering exchanges is necessary.
- A balance in the number of exchangees from each side must be achieved for sustainability.
- Under-represented groups should be recruited.
- Individual and group exchange programs, short and long term, and internships are needed.
- Interdisciplinary educational programs and problem solving opportunities should be created.
- Scholarships are needed to insure that all potential participants are able to afford exchanges.
- Funding must be adequate to support all of the above.
- Religious and cultural differences present special problems that must be anticipated.

Questions for Carousel Participants

- Do you agree with the "major points?"
- Would you add major points which are essential issues in planning the exchanges?
- What creative features would make such exchanges appealing to funding agencies?

Educational Importance

Nearly all exchange programs identify some challenges and obstacles to successful exchanges. Creativity and commitment can overcome many disadvantages including climate, culture, and geography. Exchanges can even be effective recruitment tools if managed properly. The best exchange programs take ideas from many sources and share their ideas with anyone interested. This dialogue is necessary to overcome special challenges of exchanges with Islamic countries and to address successfully misunderstanding on both sides of the exchange.