

## **The Impact and Practice of Citizen Diplomacy**

by Sherry Lee Mueller, Ph.D., and Mark Rebstock  
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### *Introduction*

Thanks to citizen diplomacy, the executive director of the Malaysian Medical Relief Society helped establish incident command systems in preparation for natural disasters based on systems she had seen first-hand in Miami, Florida.

Thanks to citizen diplomacy, the founder of an NGO in Uzbekistan is using child size, multicultural puppets that portray children with disabilities developed by the PACER Center in Minneapolis, MN to foster acceptance and overcome misconceptions among Uzbek schoolchildren about people with disabilities.

Thanks to citizen diplomacy, a breast cancer surgeon in Kosovo regularly consults with doctors via video-conference calls to the Moffit Cancer Center in Tampa, FL, changing the lives of cancer patients in the Balkans.

And thanks to citizen diplomacy, a former Czech democracy activist turned Presidential advisor, gained the foreign policy and Transatlantic understanding that led him to be a strong pro-American voice in Czech foreign affairs and to champion the Czech Republic's joining NATO. Former President, Bill Clinton, described the results of citizen diplomacy as follows in welcoming participants to the Arkansas Summit on Citizen Diplomacy in a letter dated November 6, 2011:

Although the concept of citizen diplomacy is straightforward, the results can be profound. By encouraging and empowering individuals to shape and strengthen foreign relations "one handshake at a time," the Arkansas Council for International Visitors (ACIV) creates a powerful network of engaged individuals from around the world.

The Arkansas Council for International Visitors is one of many organizations that practice citizen diplomacy throughout the United States. The National Council for International Visitors (NCIV), Friendship Force International, Sister Cities, People to People, and Rotary are a few of the best known organizations that engage in citizen diplomacy.

For the purposes of this article the authors will focus primarily on members of the National Council for International Visitors (NCIV), a dynamic nationwide network of citizen diplomats. The mission of NCIV, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, is to promote excellence in citizen diplomacy. In 2011, NCIV concluded a two-year 50th Anniversary observance with citizen diplomacy always at the core of its activities. The 50th Anniversary publication is entitled *One Handshake at a Time: NCIV's Half Century of Leadership in Citizen Diplomacy*.

### *Conceptual Framework*

NCIV members believe that building constructive relationships over time is the overarching goal of citizen diplomacy. Citizen diplomacy is the concept that the individual citizen has the responsibility to help shape U.S. foreign relations, as NCIV members often phrase it, "one handshake at a time."

There are two types of citizen diplomacy.

1) Spontaneous Citizen Diplomacy – those opportunities each of us has to affect others' perceptions of the United States as we go about our daily activities.

For example:

- A USC student befriends a foreign student sitting next to him in class;
- A business representative researches the customs of the country where she is hoping to close a deal – aware that her actions affect others' willingness to buy U.S. products and services, travel to U.S. tourist destinations, or send their children to U.S. colleges and universities;
- A passerby hears a foreign language on a main street corner and sees a couple looking puzzled and poring over a map. She offers to give directions. It may be a small gesture but it makes a big impression. It is just such cumulative gestures that the city of Philadelphia is encouraging in its quest to become “the friendliest city in America.”

2) Intentional Citizen Diplomacy – when individuals deliberately choose to participate – as guest or host – in international exchange programs designed to build positive relationships, they are engaging in intentional citizen diplomacy. Often they do this through various organizations, ranging from the Institute of International Education (IIE) to World Learning, from Youth for Understanding to the Peace Corps. The International Exchange Locator, compiled in 2011 by the Alliance for International Educational and Cultural Exchange and funded by the U.S. Department of State, is a comprehensive directory of private organizations and government agencies in the field.

### *NCIV and the IVLP as a Case Study*

Many intentional citizen diplomats become part of the NCIV network, they organize professional programs, cultural activities, and home visits for foreign leaders participating in the U.S. Department of State International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) and other exchanges. NCIV, a network of individual members, program agencies, and more than 90 community organizations throughout the United States, serves as the private sector partner to the U.S. State Department and handles the day-to-day implementation of the IVLP. U.S. Embassies and Consulates select the emerging leaders to participate in the IVLP because these leaders daily make decisions affecting U.S. interests. If a member of parliament from the United Kingdom, an NGO leader from Brazil, a journalist from Egypt, or a trade ministry official from China is invited for a three-week trip to various U.S. communities, it is NCIV members who organize their U.S. experiences in Denver or Dallas, Seattle or Syracuse. They do so with the aim of connecting these leaders to their professional counterparts in the United States. Dialogues range from environmentalists exchanging water conservation strategies to journalists discussing the fundamental principles of freedom of the press.

Another goal is to have these distinguished visitors get “beyond the headlines” and help them develop a more realistic and nuanced understanding and appreciation for the history, heritage, democratic institutions, and fundamental values of the United States.

### *The Need for Training*

The more than 90 community organizations in the NCIV network are comprised of 230 paid staff and literally tens of thousands of volunteers. Burdick and Lederer in their book *The Ugly American*, wrote: “Average Americans in their natural state are the best ambassadors a country can have.” Despite the fact that this book was written 53 years ago it deserves to be read and contains lessons that are still relevant. While everyone has the potential to be an effective citizen diplomat, training is needed. NCIV is a professional association that provides members with information, training at national and regional conferences, grants, and site visits. There are also other mechanisms to provide networking opportunities and the sharing of best practices.

### *Citizen Diplomacy at the Tipping Point*

For a variety of reasons, the term citizen diplomacy is more widely used now than at any time since President Eisenhower hosted the White House Summit on Citizen Diplomacy in 1956. NCIV played an essential role in convening the heads of sister organizations at the first Wingspread Conference on Citizen Diplomacy hosted by the Johnson Foundation in March 24 – 26, 2004. Out of that grew three National Summits on Citizen Diplomacy. The first National Summit coincided with a Sister Cities Conference in 2006, the second with the NCIV National Conference in 2008, the third was convened November 16 – 19 2010, by the U.S. Center for Citizen Diplomacy headquartered in Des Moines. Since its founding in 2006, the Center has worked diligently to increase awareness of citizen diplomacy, to recognize outstanding citizen diplomats, and to encourage all Americans to embrace their responsibility as citizen diplomats.

Citizen diplomacy is by definition a grassroots endeavor. One of the most significant results of this effort to propel the citizen diplomacy movement to the “tipping point” is the community summits on citizen diplomacy held throughout the United States. To illustrate, NCIV has allocated almost \$150,000 in privately raised dollars to give seed grants to 34 community member organizations to organize a total of 54 summits to date. These grants enable NCIV members to take the lead in convening the leaders of other organizations and agencies with international missions in their communities. The goal is to coordinate and generate synergy among these efforts as well as to recruit new volunteers, recognize the efforts of exceptional citizen diplomats, and attract new public and private funding to the field.

### *Highlights of recent summits include:*

- 1) The Albuquerque Council for International Visitors (ACIV) in cooperation with the University of New Mexico organized events spanning two days that included an opening session focusing on the impact of the Fulbright Program and featuring Fulbright alumni. This session was hosted by the Isleta Pueblo. Plenary speaker Cari Guittard, focused on corporate citizen diplomacy – the stake business has in building strong international relationships.

2) The Community Summit in Little Rock, Arkansas began with a Parade of Nations and opening plenary at the spectacular Clinton Presidential Center. A variety of sessions were held. Skip Rutherford, Dean of the Clinton School of Public Service, shared the projects his students, whom he described as citizen diplomats, work on throughout the world. A panel of NGO leaders including representatives from Heifer International, World Services for the Blind, and Partners of the Americas, described their outreach and possible ways to work together to raise their profiles and coordinate their efforts. A panel of representatives of international companies explained why they chose to locate in the state of Arkansas.

3) The Arizona Council for International Visitors (AZCIV) hosted a stellar Celebration of Citizen Diplomacy – Arizona on the Global Stage at the new Musical Instrument Museum in Phoenix. Girl Scouts led the pledge of allegiance and Kyle Moyer described AZCIV work with the IVLP. Featured speaker Republican Congressman Ben Quayle was most articulate about Arizona’s need to reach out to the rest of the world.

### *Lessons for Practitioners*

The authors’ extensive experience working with NCIV members has produced some key lessons for practitioners of citizen diplomacy. These lessons are for leaders of organizations dedicated to citizen diplomacy and for citizen diplomats in charge of planning international exchange programs for foreign participants.

### *Lessons for U.S. Organizations*

1) For some organizations engaged in federally funded international exchange programs, advocacy with the U.S. Congress must be a top priority. The NCIV network has become an active domestic constituency for the IVLP – and for Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) exchanges in general. Published in 2008 by Jossey-Bass, *Forces for Good* is an excellent book on nonprofit management. The methodology mirrors that of the Jim Collins’ *From Good to Great*. Authors Heather Grant and Leslie Crutchfield discuss the six characteristics of highly successful nonprofits. One key characteristic is engaging in advocacy. Wise NGO leaders realize it is not enough to deliver quality services; you must also influence the public policies affecting your field. Although State Department exchange programs have enjoyed bipartisan support and the ECA budget for international educational and cultural programs has increased, the United States devotes a relatively miniscule amount to these vital programs, \$600 million in FY 2011.

NCIV’s annual Breakfast on the Hill, collaboration with the Alliance, advocacy training at National and Regional Conferences, and ongoing relationship building with members of Congress and their staffers (especially at the state and district levels) are vital components of NCIV advocacy efforts. Many sister organizations engage in similar activities.

2) Outreach to alumni should be considered an integral component of exchange programs. In the case of the IVLP, maintaining good relationships with alumni enables our diplomats to elicit cooperation from other nations on topics ranging from trade agreements to the prevention of epidemics. The State Department started its Office of Alumni Affairs in 2004 and employs 1

Foreign Service Officer, 5 civil servants, and 6 contractors. There are approximately 90 Alumni Coordinators at posts around the world working on alumni engagement.

Since 2003 one of the signature events at the annual NCIV National Conference has been an IVLP Alumni Luncheon. With travel funded privately (first United Airlines and then Carlson Companies), various alumni have described the impact of their U.S. experiences. They include a Yemeni NGO leader with long-standing ties to Minot, ND, a Japanese journalist, and a Czech presidential advisor. Willem Post, the TV commentator on US Presidential elections in The Netherlands was the first speaker. Willem was so impressed by the volunteerism of the NCIV network that he worked with the Mayor to found The Hague Hospitality Center for Foreign Media and Visitors modeled after NCIV member organizations.

Willem was instrumental in working with the U.S. Embassy to establish the IVLP Alumni Association and that launch coincided with a self-funded “NCIV Visits” trip to The Netherlands. In September, there was an “NCIV Visits France” trip thanks to our Embassy in Paris and the Cercle Jefferson, the IVLP Alumni Association that boasts more than 500 members. Their directory is a veritable Who’s Who of French leaders. The NCIV trip to Paris was planned to coincide with the 10th Anniversary of the Cercle Jefferson and included memorable events at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Hotel du Talleyrand – the splendid palace the U.S. Embassy purchased to host such special occasions.

As part of the commemoration of NCIV’s 50th Anniversary, the U.S. Department of State sponsored 18 distinguished alumni of the IVLP for a special “Gold Star tour” enabling them to participate in NCIV’s 50th anniversary national conference and to revisit a key community that was a part of their original trip. Alice Nkom from Cameroon is a fine example. As an IVLP participant in 2003, she learned about The Oregon Bus Project, a volunteer-driven, nonprofit organization, founded to foster meaningful political dialogue. After her IVLP experience, Alice started a version of this project called “Get on the Bus,” and registered more than 300,000 voters in her country. When she returned to Portland in February of 2011, she told her hosts that she has been born twice – once in Cameroon, her birth home, and once in Portland as a citizen activist.

3) Peter Drucker, the management guru who spent the last years of his life focused on the nonprofit sector, which he called the “social sector,” once said “partner or die.” His comment underscores that the success of an organization should be judged at least in part by the power and scope of partnerships forged. To illustrate, NCIV’s overarching 50th Anniversary goal was building multigenerational leadership at the local and national levels. The aim is not the passing of the torch to a new generation, but getting people of each generation to take leadership roles and to work together in recruiting young people.

NCIV’s ongoing partnership with Girl Scouts of the USA is an excellent example. Conversations between Director of Global Action for the Girl Scouts and NCIV led to a proposal to the U.S. Department of State’s Office of International Visitors that there be a Multi-Regional IVL Project for Girl Scout and Girl Guide administrators from around the world. The State Department embraced the idea. In November of 2011, 23 visitors from around the world participated in a project that culminated in the Centennial Celebration of the Girl Scouts of the

USA in Houston. The officials at Girl Scout headquarters in New York said this project strengthened the movement worldwide in addition to being life-transforming experiences for the participants. Now NCIV members who host Summits on citizen diplomacy are asked to involve the Girl Scouts as well as members of Congress in these local assemblies of leaders representing organizations with international missions.

### *Lessons for Practitioners*

Assessing the outcomes of educational experiences is always complicated. The evaluation process itself is a product of cultural assumptions. Nonetheless, there are a series of seven questions that citizen diplomats (paid or voluntary) should ask to ascertain if they are practicing citizen diplomacy in a responsible way that maximizes positive impact for guest and host.

#### **1. Does program participation preserve or enhance the credibility of the participant in his or her own country?**

There is a critical, though often unappreciated, need to be concerned with preserving the credibility of an exchange program participant. Program administrators must do everything possible to assure that a participant does not suffer unnecessarily when he returns home because he accepted an invitation and funding from the U.S. Government or merely because he participated in an exchange program that brought him to the United States.

Mueller first became aware of the importance of this credibility factor while researching the impact of participation in the U.S. Department of State-sponsored Asian and Pacific Student Leader Project. That study, conducted during the latter years of the Vietnam War, showed that some of the project alumni had lost their positions of leadership in student organizations due to the close association with the United States that their participation in the project represented.

A concern for a participant's credibility acknowledges that the impact of an exchange experience is affected in a major way by the participant's post-program experience. The extent to which program administrators take this into account directly influences program quality. For example, it may be important to caution certain visitors from the Middle East about speaking with reporters (and to caution local hosts to avoid scheduling interviews without consultation or to avoid reporting a visit on Facebook). A photo or misquoted remark could have dire consequences. In contrast another visitor might be well-served by some press coverage. A concern for quality must reflect a genuine interest in a participant's long-term welfare and a desire, insofar as possible, to augment rather than diminish his influence in his home country.

#### **2. Is continuity built into the program?**

Given the goal of establishing ongoing communication between exchange program participants and host country citizens it is necessary to design programs so that participants are exposed to the same people more than once and have opportunities to develop genuine and continuing relationships with their hosts. Building continuity into a program may take many forms. It may mean arranging for a member of the family that hosted a short-term international visitor for dinner to accompany the visitor to the airport. Perhaps it includes an introductory session on a

specific professional issue conducted by the same expert who later handles a subsequent session to help visitors synthesize their experiences or is available to talk informally at a reception. It may mean arranging a series of meetings for a foreign student with the same class of students at the local high school or the same group at a local civic organization. It may include finding a responsible host family for a visiting scholar. The use of new social media tools such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Skype, and others hold great potential for supporting the continued relationship building and continuity that can flow from person-to-person international exchange.

### **3. Is reciprocity built into the program?**

Closely related to the question of continuity, the need to build reciprocity into a program is often emphasized but particularly difficult to implement. Not surprisingly, research has shown that active, contributing exchange participants learn more, develop more self-esteem, and return home more satisfied than passive, uninvolved participants. A genuine concern with quality suggests that program planners must deliberately organize programs that provide opportunities for authentic participation and involvement on the part of the foreign scholars and visitors. Perhaps the most frequently used method of building reciprocity into a program is to arrange for the visitor to teach a class at a local university, college, or high school. The best alternative is to have the visitor meet with the same class on several occasions during whatever period of time is available. International exchange programs can offer other opportunities for public speaking, community volunteering, or media interviews as well to build in reciprocity. Providing the visitor with an appropriate forum in an educational institution, a civic organization, or other settings is essential.

To illustrate, the Institute of International Education has planned programs for State Department visitors that have given them opportunities to join their U.S. counterparts on panels and to teach classes on the campuses they visited. The visitors are generally delighted with opportunities to share their professional expertise and cultural perspectives. The fact that Americans demonstrate their genuine appreciation of the visitors by listening and treating them as valued colleagues goes a long way toward building lasting relationships and identifying areas of fruitful cooperation. The donor-recipient relationship, characteristic of some exchange programs, has inherent limitations. True quality is dependent on the host's ability to transform that relationship into one of collegial "give and take" and to structure the program as a series of mutual learning opportunities for both participants and hosts.

### **4. What does the administration of the program teach the participant?**

The way exchange programs are administered is inevitably a reflection of the host culture and teaches participants more about that culture and its values than even the most persuasive speaker could. Participants learn much more about our democratic institutions, who we are as a people, and what we value by the way the program is administered, than they do from any expert we may recruit to interact with them. The British scholar Giles Scott Smith, author of *Networks of Empire*, reported on his extensive research on the impact of the IVLP participation on European leaders noting that it is the freedom of movement and exposure to diverse points of view that truly impressed these visitors. The fact that day-to-day responsibility for the design and

implementation of his program is in the hands of staff at a private program agency emphasizes the value the United States places on the private sector and its primary role in society better than a political science professor could explain in the most eloquent of lectures.

### **5. Is the professional component of the program substantive and appropriate?**

The professional content in most exchange programs is the core of the program and must reflect careful conceptualization and internal coherence. This is true whether the program participant is a student, scholar or short-term visitor. Decisions regarding course of study, degrees to be attained or the short-term professional experiences of visitors or trainees are critically important.

The professional dimension of the program should balance “state-of-the-art” activities with those that are genuinely relevant and have a catalytic effect on the thinking of the participant. For example, it may be important for international visitors to the United States in the field of higher education to visit a “name” university for protocol reasons or to be exposed to the most advanced or elaborate project of its kind in the country. But a visit to an excellent community college may be much more professionally productive, offering more in-depth discussions and more promising opportunities for future collaboration. While planning the professional program, organizers must continually consider what resources are appropriate for a given individual or group of exchangees and relevant to the needs and priorities in their home countries.

### **6. Is the cultural component of the program stimulating and appropriate?**

Do the cultural/social activities planned for exchange program participants enable them to develop a better understanding of the history and heritage of the host country? Do these activities enable them to interact with host country citizens in ways that puncture rather than reinforce common stereotypes about that country that the foreign participant may have acquired from the media and other sources? For example, it can be argued that U.S. Government-sponsored exchange programs should include visits to historic sights with knowledgeable Americans to dispel the myth that Americans are only “me-now” oriented with little regard even for their own, much less anyone else’s, history and cultural heritage. Programs should include visits to National Parks and other places of natural beauty to assure participants that U.S. citizens do appreciate and conserve these resources. There should be meaningful contact with Americans in their homes. Most IVLP alumni judge “home hospitality” to be the most significant part of their U.S. experiences. In sum, the cultural aspect of the program should deliberately underscore the common humanity and shared aspirations of host and participant.

### **7. Have logistics been carefully planned?**

The impact of the most substantive professional meeting or stimulating cultural activity can be diluted if the participant is preoccupied wondering how to acquire a phone card, buy a winter coat, open an appropriate bank account, or have a piece of luggage repaired. Planners must allocate sufficient time and provide detailed information and assistance so that participants can handle these mundane tasks promptly and with ease. Time for interpretation, rest, and picture-taking must be calculated. Organizers of quality exchange programs envision the entire educational experience that is being planned without losing sight of the myriad of minute details

that must be taken into account if the program is to be implemented with maximum effectiveness and minimum participant anxiety.

It is often those events that no one can orchestrate that have the biggest impact on a participant such as a conversation with a friendly cab driver or the chance meeting with a kind and interested professor. Program administrators must acknowledge their limits and recognize that the country and culture they are representing and attempting to explain will, to a large extent, speak for themselves. Is time allowed for serendipity?

Firsthand encounters with citizen diplomats trump grim headlines and stereotypical sound bites. An Albany volunteer offered this description of his family's experience hosting a delegation from Uganda. He captured the impact of citizen diplomacy:

These visits are worth gold to US public diplomacy. Not only do they allow for visitors to meet their peers in the United States (and hopefully remain in touch with many of them) and gather important professionally relevant information they can take home, the IVLP is also an important way for Americans to meet people from parts of the world they are unlikely to visit themselves. The US population remains woefully uninformed about international affairs and this has serious implications for foreign policy and funding for foreign assistance—as well as the ability of Americans to appreciate and participate in globalization. The IVLP makes these issues less a matter for The New York Times and more a conversation over a dinner table, a small meeting in an office, and a friendship begun that might last for decades. Yes, high-level diplomacy has its place and it requires trained professionals to carry it out. But it must be buttressed by the engagement of non-professionals who can meet and exchange views in informal settings that defuse the intense politics that often dominate official meetings. US foreign policy cannot live on Track II diplomacy alone, but it also can't live without it. As the conversations over my dinner table last week proved, serious issues can be addressed in informal venues and all involved are the better for it. Citizen diplomacy is good for diplomacy—and for the citizens who engage in it. This is quiet and unheralded work but it deserves the continued (and increased) support of the US government.

Sherry Lee Mueller

*The board of the National Council for International Visitors (NCIV) gave Sherry the title President Emeritus when she retired in 2011 after 16 years at the helm of this professional association of citizen diplomats. She provided leadership for the field as well as NCIV. Her various publications include the book on international careers Working World coauthored by Mark Overmann and published by Georgetown University Press. She will be once again teaching at the School of International Service at American University fall 2012.*

Mark W. Rebstock

*Mark W. Rebstock joined the National Council for International Visitors (NCIV) in August 2005, and currently serves as NCIV's Interim President. Previously, he served as NCIV's Vice President.*