

What is Public Diplomacy?

As traditionally used, the term “diplomacy” refers to government-to-government relations (e.g., an American diplomat discusses an issue officially with a Chinese diplomat). Much newer, however, is the practice of “Public Diplomacy,” where the U.S. Government seeks to directly engage the people of another country.

Public Diplomacy emerged as an important tool of American foreign policy during the Cold War. During that period, the United States brought foreign students, professors, and political and business leaders to the United States for educational and cultural exchanges on the Exchange Visitor Program. By experiencing American society and culture, many of these foreign students and leaders developed positive impressions of the American system, which they shared with their fellow countrymen upon returning home.

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Public Diplomacy took on new importance as American foreign policy actively sought to improve the image of the United States abroad, especially among young people. Educational exchanges, long recognized as one of the best ways to build positive impressions of the United States among the youth of another country, moved to the forefront of the U.S. Department of State’s Public Diplomacy efforts.

Central to this emergence of Public Diplomacy as a major tool of American foreign policy is the belief that citizens of other countries would generally have positive view of the United States if only they knew more about the American people. This assumption turns out to be true. Major research institutes consistently demonstrate that people from other countries who come to the United States are far more likely to have a positive impression of both the United States and the American people. In one particular study, the Travel Industry Association’s research arm, the Discover America Partnership, found that those who have visited the United States are 74% more likely to have a favorable opinion of America and Americans, and 66% of those who have visited are more likely to be supportive of U.S. policies. Similarly, a 2008 report entitled *The Decline in America’s Reputation: Why?* by the House Committee on Foreign Affairs’ Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight found that international visitors to the United States “have more positive views about America and Americans than non-visitors by approximately 10 percentage points.”

Secondary School Student Program exchanges similarly help to improve America’s image abroad. The great majority of exchange students who come to the United States to attend high school enjoy a positive life-changing experience, grow in independence and maturity, improve

their English language skills, and build relationships with American citizens. These students will share with their fellow citizens their impressions of America when they return home. This is the core of Public Diplomacy and the reason that the Department of State conducts these types of educational exchanges.

For these reasons, it is important that every exchange student have a positive experience and a successful program. While most exchange students generally return home with a favorable impression of the United States, the Public Diplomacy of the United States can be damaged when a student develops negative feelings toward the United States or the American people. Much of the responsibility to ensure a successful program for each exchange student falls on you, the Local Coordinator.

What is the Exchange Visitor Program?

The Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961 authorizes the U.S. Department of State to conduct educational exchange programs. Many of these programs fall under the Department's Exchange Visitor Program, which uses the J-1 visa to bring people from other countries to the United States for temporary study and work-related educational opportunities.

The U.S. Department of State both creates and enforces the federal regulations governing the Exchange Visitor Program. The Department also designates U.S. organizations (known as sponsors) to conduct exchange visitor programs. These sponsors – and all Local Coordinators – are required to follow the federal regulations.

At the present time, 92 sponsors are designated by the U.S. Department of State to conduct Secondary School Student programs under the Exchange Visitor Program. These 92 sponsors collectively manage the programs of approximately 28,000 exchange students each year. As a Local Coordinator, you work directly for one of these sponsors.

Secondary School Student Program

Begun in 1949, the Secondary School Student Program is one of the oldest and most successful Exchange Visitor Programs and is a cornerstone of the United States' Public Diplomacy efforts. The Secondary School Student Program offers an opportunity of a lifetime to young people from around the world to study in an American high school, improve their English, and make lifelong American friends.

How does the Secondary School Student Program Operate?

The U.S. Department of State requires all Secondary School Student Program sponsors to be non-profit organizations to ensure that this important Public Diplomacy activity retains its volunteer spirit. These sponsors contract with foreign partners (international non-profit

organizations, student recruiting agencies, or affiliate organizations of the U.S. sponsor) in other countries to recruit local exchange students to apply for participation in the Secondary School Student Program. Foreign partners then collect application information from the potential exchange students, verify their eligibility for participation, and provide this information to the U.S. sponsor.

The U.S. sponsor is responsible for the selection (or acceptance) of each potential exchange student for participation in the Secondary School Student Program. Screening and selection by the U.S. sponsor includes a review of the student application and an interview to test the student's ability in English, maturity, and readiness to participate in the exchange program. The sponsor is also responsible for the school enrollment, orientation, and monitoring of exchange students.

U.S. sponsors are also responsible for the screening, selection, orientation, and quality assurance monitoring of host families and field staff.

Once fully screened and selected by the U.S. sponsor for participation, an exchange student is provided the Form DS-2019, Certificate of Eligibility. This Form enables the exchange student to apply for a J-1 visa at a United States Embassy or Consulate abroad.

The exchange student uses both the Form DS-2019 and J-1 visa, which is affixed to their passport, to gain entry into the United States and begin their exchange program.

What is the Role of the Local Coordinator?

As a Local Coordinator, you will be entrusted to carry out many of the responsibilities of the U.S. sponsor. For this reason, your work is critical to making each exchange program a success.

Specifically, you will recruit appropriate potential host families. You will help these families complete their host family applications. The U.S. sponsor you work for will vet each potential host family you recruit and then select or deny the family for participation in the program. U.S. sponsors ultimately determine whether or not a family may participate in the program.

You will also be provided the profiles of fully-selected exchange students. You will match these students, as best as you can, with the host families you have recruited and that have been fully-vetted and selected for participation. Please note that you may only show student photographs and personal information to host families that have been fully-vetted and selected for participation in the program by the U.S. sponsor.

Placing an exchange student with a host family is the most important stage of the Secondary School Student program. Exchange students matched with host families who are a good fit are likely to have successful exchange programs.

Importantly, you will also serve as the exchange students' advocate and a major link in their support system while they are in the United States. You are required to maintain monthly contact with each of your exchange students and to address problems they bring to your attention.