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Highlights from CPD’s Virtual Roundtable on International Exchange ^[1]

Among all public diplomacy programs, international exchange programs are hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. CPD recently sat down with a dozen leaders in the field of international exchange to share perspectives and practices in navigating the challenging dynamics posed by the pandemic, the resulting needs and demands, and to more creatively explore plans for the future. The challenges are manifold, from logistic and technical to financial and strategic. Still, the current disruption also provides opportunities to reflect on past models and to design new ones.

Can international exchange take place virtually as well as it does in person to advance mutual understanding or form partnerships for collaboration? To answer this and similar questions, the following four themes were explored at the roundtable.

Exploring the benefits of virtual programming

Reimagining international exchange and cross-cultural connections for a world that operates mostly virtually is difficult without physical proximity of people. At the same time, leaders are evaluating the right balance between virtual and in-person components of post-pandemic programs. There is a dearth of research on comparing exchange experiences across the physical and virtual worlds to guide strategic planning for virtual and hybrid models. While it is important to be realistic about what is possible virtually, it is also possible to break down the barriers to participation such as distance or disabilities because of virtual programs. Virtual programming could further broaden the scope of eligible program participants across various demographics. For example, an exchange program designed for a younger population that is tech-savvy might be quite effective, even without the in-person aspect. As part of hybrid programs, with both virtual and in-person components, some program administrators see benefit in providing educational material digitally before a physical visit and collaboration takes place, then maintaining the connections virtually.

Assessing exchange networks as resources

From the International Visitors Leadership program to a non-governmental dance collaboration project, many exchange programs have developed a network of alumni and a network of partners over the years. There is a broad need among program administrators to gain better knowledge about their networks, their composition and value, and to strategize for maintaining and enhancing their networks. A crucial step in harnessing the network effect of international exchange is to apply network analysis tools to uncover the nature and performance of existing alumni and partner networks. Such analysis will allow us to better understand network structure and network performance capacity, which could be beneficial for strategizing future plans and prioritizing resource allocation. Network analysis can complement other analyses to guide how networks of partners can be strengthened as messengers.



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Making exchange more just and inclusive

Addressing issues related to social justice is front and central to the development of exchange programs to make them more inclusive, just and accessible for people with diverse backgrounds and constraints. A new generation of programs are being designed to further engage under-represented audiences. Additionally, virtual collaborations could allow the participating sides to be on a more equal setting in terms of their contribution and partnership, which could make exchanges more meaningful and effective.

Exchange organization staff and partners can bring the diverse perspectives they have developed from past personal or professional experiences and cultures. One ripple effect of this diversity is potential improvements to the selection of program participants to eliminate systematic discrimination. In the United States, the selection of host partners and American program participants can be done such that the selected group is more representative of the country.

New skillsets for international exchange

Another important area of development is staff skills to make organizations more capable of designing and administering hybrid (online/offline) programs. Skills such as digital storytelling, communication, collaboration and online teaching are critical, in addition to the cultural diversity and past experiences of staff members. There is need for an overall more tech-savvy team that works on a range of efforts, from reimagining exchanges and upgrading procedures to technology procurement and tech-enabled team communication and collaboration. Staff members need to have the skills to connect well with each other and with partners online, using technology, ethics and diversity.

Traveling, as the traditional cornerstone of exchange programs, has stopped. While it is important to acknowledge this obstacle, it is imperative to take advantage of the slowdown of some programs to focus on systematic changes and on reimagining international exchange to make it efficiently hybrid, more just and inclusive. As we examine the long-term impact of COVID-19 on international exchange, it is essential that the community explores ways to harness technology and data to advance the practice. The reimagined exchange can be a mechanism for self-reflection as much as it is about cultural promotion.
