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Photo by Brianna R

Global Engagement Matters for U.S. Communities ^[1]

Today, February 16, is Citizen Diplomacy Day, recognized by the United States Congress to celebrate the extraordinary impact our people have in building the relationships that underpin U.S. national security alliances. It lauds the people who engage in public diplomacy by welcoming international exchange participants into their homes, workplaces, and communities and the remarkable soft power they generate for the United States through sharing and living our democratic culture.

This is the work of the nationwide Global Ties Network, which believes that diplomacy – for our world and our country – begins with all of us. Diplomacy, by definition, is “the profession, activity, or skill of managing international relations.” It is, inherently, about people: to create peace and prosperity, we need to know one another. Citizen Diplomacy is the belief that all people have the right, even the responsibility, to engage in international relations through learning, listening, and building trusting relationships. Our Diplomats’ ability to represent and support the United States is advanced by the scores of citizens who take the time to engage with global leaders via international exchange programs.

Global Ties U.S. was created more than 60 years ago to support U.S. cities and communities in actively participating in international relations, via the U.S. Department of State’s International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP). More recently, we engaged USC’s Center on Public Diplomacy to develop a methodology to better understand the benefits of citizen diplomacy here at home. On average each year, more than 15,500 volunteers nationwide through our network contribute more than 192,000 hours to create meaningful experiences for international leaders visiting our cities. We wanted to show the ripple effect of this engagement within our cities and the domestic impact of global exchange.

We found that when people in the United States interacted with international exchange participants in their cities, the citizen diplomats boosted their global knowledge, skills, and connections. More than 80% say they learned more about international affairs and 58% believe these exchange programs improve their ability to attract international investment. It also supports workforce development: 66% learned new skills that helped them do their job better. This underscores that these programs are not just about providing an experience, they are about the exchange of knowledge and ideas critical for our economy.

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Perhaps even more important, this volunteerism and engagement as citizen ambassadors helped to ease divisions and strengthen communities at home. 79% of volunteers who work with our 80+ member organizations nationwide reported greater appreciation for different cultural groups in their own communities. And 58% are more likely to become more engaged with a local or community issue. The work inspires more diplomacy within the United States -- more sensitivity and listening.

As we are witnessing right now with climate change and war, what happens globally impacts our economy, national security, and the health of our democracy. Our markets and communications are densely and globally networked, something which Pew Research Center recently found that younger generations instinctively understand and are embracing. Citizen diplomacy is a pathway to build the relationships that make navigating a complex world – and country -- more manageable.

This Citizen Diplomacy Day, we hope you'll think about what you can do to seek out opportunities for cross-cultural understanding and to listen to someone with a different perspective. Look up members of the Global Ties Network and see which organization is nearby to help volunteer and host a global leader. Think about the ripple effect global engagement can have within your community and for our country. And, most of all, we hope you will remember that diplomacy begins here, with all of us.
