

Music Diplomacy and Network Effects: Strategies for Amplifying Influence

By Jen McAndrew

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Abstract

Public diplomacy practitioners face a persistent challenge: creating influence that lasts beyond a one-time cultural exchange. Traditional evaluation metrics—attendance figures, participant satisfaction, media mentions—capture immediate visibility but miss the compounding value of sustained relationships. This article reframes music exchanges as network-building interventions rather than one-time cultural programs, examining how strategic design can generate self-sustaining ecosystems that produce influence for years. Drawing on network theory and examples of music exchanges produced by the U.S. State Department and U.S. Embassies, this article provides practitioners with frameworks for designing programs that activate network effects. It analyzes how different network architectures—hub-and-spoke, mesh, clustered, and hybrid models—can serve distinct foreign policy goals including peacebuilding, creative industry development, heritage preservation, and civic engagement. Through examples of U.S. initiatives like Center Stage, OneBeat, and Sound Bridge, the article demonstrates how participant selection, resource allocation, and exchange structure create durable relational infrastructure. It also outlines an impact evaluation framework organized around four dimensions: connectivity (structural change in relationships), collaboration (sustained joint activity), influence (public and institutional impact), and expansion (autonomous network growth). This approach shifts evaluation from measuring outputs and outcomes, to tracking whether networks generate compounding returns. For practitioners working with constrained budgets, these actionable strategies can transform music exchanges into engines of soft power, where each new participant increases value for the entire ecosystem.

Introduction: The Network Imperative in Cultural Diplomacy

While the value of cultural exchanges in generating soft power influence is well established, in an era of constrained budgets and competing priorities, exchanges must demonstrate lasting value. An artist tour or exchange that generates positive press but does not sustain relationships beyond the program leaves potential influence unrealized. The challenge facing public diplomacy practitioners is not whether exchanges create value—they clearly do—but how to design programs that transform momentary connection into enduring influence.

Recognizing and engaging culture at a fundamental level is essential for public diplomacy to build meaningful, sustainable influence (Zaharna, 2012). Music diplomacy offers unique advantages for addressing this challenge. Unlike policy speeches or traditional diplomatic messaging, music often transcends language barriers and reaches audiences through emotion and shared experience. Musicians can also function as cultural ambassadors whose artistic work creates natural opportunities for dialogue and relationship-building (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). Their creativity functions as cultural capital (a soft power resource), enabling artists to attract and engage audiences across borders (Bourdieu, 1984; Nye, 2004). When leveraged in exchanges, this cultural capital becomes a vehicle for soft power, amplifying influence through networks of both strong and weak social ties (Granovetter, 1973; Nye, 2004). The collaborative nature of musical creation provides a vehicle for sustained engagement that outlasts any single performance. Yet these inherent advantages only translate into lasting influence when exchanges are designed to generate positive associations over time, more formally known as network effects.

This article synthesizes insights from seventeen years of producing cultural exchanges for U.S. Embassies and applying network theory to music diplomacy. It provides practitioners with a framework for designing exchanges that generate self-sustaining networks, examples of network models in action, and an evaluation framework for measuring their effects. The next sections examine the theoretical foundations of music as a network catalyst and explore how network topologies can serve a range of foreign policy goals. Whether in designing a new cultural exchange, or enhancing existing programs, this guide offers strategies for transforming music exchanges into lasting engines of soft power.

Musicians as Network Catalysts: Why Music Creates Enduring Influence

In the 21st century, influence increasingly flows through webs of connection rather than formal hierarchies (Fisher, 2010; Slaughter, 2017). These decentralized networks are particularly well suited to music diplomacy. As Hesmondhalgh argues in *Why Music Matters*, musicians function not only as artists but as cultural ambassadors and natural network builders (2013). Their public credibility and cross-cultural appeal position them as influential intermediaries capable of amplifying ideas across social and geographic boundaries. Cold War-era U.S. jazz ambassador tours illustrate this dynamic: by sending musicians into countries with limited diplomatic access, the State Department leveraged music's relational power to engage audiences beyond the reach of traditional statecraft (Von Eschen, 2004; Schneider, 2006; Cull, 2008).

Music possesses several structural properties that make it particularly effective for diplomatic engagement. First, music is inherently collaborative. Unlike artistic forms that can be produced in isolation, most musical

traditions—from jazz to hip-hop—require active listening, adaptation, and shared creation. Collaboration generates sustained interpersonal interaction rather than one-directional transmission. Second, music provides a framework for engagement across difference. A Pakistani musician and an Indian musician might disagree on political issues, but shared heritage in classical ragas or Sufi devotional music provides a basis for dialogue. Third, musical outputs endure. Songs created during exchanges circulate through streaming platforms, social media, and professional networks, extending the life of the exchange and embedding its outcomes within broader cultural ecosystems. These artifacts serve as both documentation of the exchange and generators of soft power, reaching listeners who may never have heard of the original exchange but encounter the resulting music via social sharing.

Musicians as Credible Messengers and Network Bridges

Musicians occupy a distinctive social position within networks. Unlike government representatives, they are generally perceived as authentic cultural voices rather than institutional actors (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). This perceived authenticity enables them to communicate messages—about coexistence, mutual respect, or human rights—that might be rejected if delivered through official channels. Musicians' influence derives not from formal authority but from relational trust, and as Cull argues, sometimes the most credible voices in public diplomacy are not one's own (2010). Music's power also lies in its participatory and social nature, allowing audiences to engage actively rather than passively receive a message (Turino, 2008). This participatory dynamic deepens relational engagement and reinforces musicians' credibility as cultural interlocutors rather than policy advocates. At the network level, musicians often function as bridges linking otherwise disconnected communities.

When artists collaborate across borders, they connect fan bases, professional networks, media ecosystems, and diaspora communities. Each partnership establishes new pathways through which future collaborations, institutional relationships, and audience engagement can flow. Strategic participant selection—particularly artists who already span multiple social or cultural spheres—therefore amplifies the structural reach of an exchange. The impact lies not only in the event itself but in the new connections embedded within overlapping networks.

Collaboration: The Essential Ingredient

The distinction between ephemeral and durable music exchange lies in the difference between performance and collaboration. Performance-centered programs generate immediate visibility and symbolic value but typically produce one-directional relationships: artist performs, audience receives, event concludes. In contrast, collaboration-centered exchanges transform participants into co-creators who share ownership of creative outcomes. Co-creation requires sustained interaction—deep listening, negotiation of artistic meaning, and shared vulnerability (Oliveros, 2005). Oliveros's conceptualization converges with Cull's argument that effective public diplomacy begins not with projection but with listening: understanding the other before seeking to be understood (Cull, 2008). This reciprocal engagement builds trust and mutual investment, generating relationships that persist beyond an initial intervention. Designing for listening and collaboration requires a structural shift in exchange programming. Rather than maximizing the number of performances across multiple cities, collaboration-centered initiatives invest time in fewer locations and emphasize creative process over finished product. Although this approach may reduce short-term audience size, it strengthens relational density and increases the likelihood of sustained partnership. As Zaharna and

colleagues argue, networked public diplomacy depends on connective design rather than broadcast reach (Zaharna et al., 2013).

Diffusion, Weak Ties, and Long-Term Reach

Music exchanges also benefit from the dynamics of network diffusion. Because musical works circulate digitally, collaborative outputs continue to reach new audiences long after an exchange concludes. A song developed during a short residency may initially reach hundreds through live performance but later connect with thousands through streaming, playlist inclusion, and social sharing. In this way, music activates weak ties—connections across otherwise distant social networks—to disseminate ideas beyond immediate participants (Granovetter, 1973). Audiences then engage with these works within a cultural rather than overtly political frame (Snow & Benford, 1988). This framing allows ideas to travel through everyday listening practices rather than formal policy channels, expanding reach without triggering defensive responses associated with official messaging. When artists retain creative autonomy, the resulting work resonates as genuine cultural expression, strengthening rather than undermining the exchange's credibility. This dynamic is particularly significant in regions where countries are separated by closed borders or frozen conflicts, as cultural circulation can sustain interpersonal ties even when formal diplomatic channels are constrained.

Network Architecture: How Design Shapes Influence

Understanding *why* musicians create influence is only half the equation. *How* that impact spreads depends on network design, which shapes both reach and longevity of an exchange. Network theory provides

analytical tools for understanding and designing complex systems of relationships and has in recent years attracted growing interest in its application to international relations (Adler, 2018; Castells, 1996; Fisher, 2010; Ramo, 2016). While originally developed to analyze computer networks and biological systems, network theory has proven increasingly valuable for understanding social phenomena. In translating these concepts for international relations, network nodes become the countries, institutions, or exchange participants, and the links are the relationships, collaborations, or channels of communication. *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications* (Faust & Wasserman, 1994) is a foundational text for network theory, but practitioners new to the field may wish to start with *Social Network Analysis: History, Theory and Methodology*, for a comprehensive introduction (Prell, 2012).

When designing an exchange, key concepts, such as network density, centrality, and resilience can be leveraged to strengthen an exchange through intentional design choices. Network density refers to the proportion of connections—a denser network has more relationships per participant. Network centrality refers to identifying well-connected nodes that can serve as hubs or bridges. Network resilience describes how well a network continues functioning when nodes or connections are removed. A network effect occurs when the value of a system increases as more participants join—each new connection makes the entire network more valuable for all participants (Faust & Wasserman, 1994). A useful resource for applying network theory to international relations is *The Chessboard and the Web: Strategies of Connection in a Networked World*, which offers further exploration of how to design collaborative networks for addressing complex global challenges (Slaughter, 2017).

Each network model produces different tradeoffs between scale, depth, and resilience. The next section will

discuss three network structures that are relevant to exchange programs—hub-and-spoke, decentralized mesh, and clustered—with case examples of each structure in practice. Hub-and-spoke networks maximize reach and coordination efficiency but limit peer-to-peer relationships. Mesh networks generate deep relationships and creative innovation but require intensive resources. Clustered networks focus impact on specific regions or communities while maintaining broader connections. The most sophisticated exchange programs often combine elements from multiple models, creating hybrid networks tailored to specific policy goals and contexts.

Hub-and-Spoke Networks: Centralized Coordination with Regional Reach

One of the simplest network topologies is the hub-and-spoke structure, which centralizes coordination and branding around a central node while extending reach through spoke connections. In music diplomacy, the hub typically consists of a touring ensemble or featured artist, while the spokes represent local venues, partner organizations, or collaborative activities in each city visited.

The U.S. State Department's [Center Stage](#) program, implemented from 2012 to 2025 by New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA), exemplifies this approach. Center Stage brought international ensembles to tour multiple U.S. cities, combining performances with workshops and community engagement. The touring ensemble and implementing organization (in this case, NEFA) serves as the hub, maintaining consistent programming and messaging across cities, while local presenters and partner organizations serve as spokes, adapting the program to their specific community contexts and maintaining relationships with local audiences.

Hub-and-spoke networks offer several advantages. They enable consistent quality control and branding, because the central node maintains artistic standards and messaging. They achieve geographic reach efficiently with a single hub connected to many spokes. With communication flowing between the hub and individual spokes, rather than requiring peer-to-peer coordination among all participants, complexity is reduced. They also create opportunities for knowledge transfer, as the hub can share expertise and best practices with multiple spoke organizations.

However, hub-and-spoke networks have limitations. They create dependency on the central hub—if the hub fails, the entire network may fall apart. They limit peer-to-peer learning and collaboration among spoke organizations, as relationships primarily flow through the hub. They can be vulnerable to bottlenecks, and they may generate limited network effects, as the value created for each spoke organization depends primarily on their relationship with the hub rather than on the total number of participants. To enhance hub-and-spoke networks, designers can incorporate elements that enable spoke-to-spoke connections. Some programs also maintain online platforms where spoke organizations can share resources and connect directly. These additions can transform a pure hub-and-spoke model into a more resilient hybrid structure.

Mesh Networks: Decentralized Peer-to-Peer Collaboration

Mesh networks represent a different approach. Rather than centralizing coordination, mesh networks enable direct peer-to-peer connections among all participants. Each node can connect to multiple other nodes, creating a web of relationships rather than a hierarchical structure. This format excels at fostering authentic partnerships, generating creative innovation,

and building resilience. The U.S. State Department's [OneBeat](#) initiative, implemented by [Found Sound Nation](#) and Bang on a Can, exemplifies the mesh network model. From 2012 to 2025, OneBeat brought together 25 solo artists from a diverse range of countries and musical traditions for an annual month-long U.S. residency. Rather than featuring a lead artist or ensemble, OneBeat treated all participants as peers who collaborate in self-organized groups. Participants formed multiple collaborative partnerships throughout the residency, working with different colleagues on different projects. This created a dense network of relationships. In a cohort of 25 participants, there are hundreds of possible pair connections, and many of these become active relationships through the residency.

Emphasizing collaboration and creative production rather than finished performances, OneBeat built a global alumni network of nearly 600 artists from 78 countries who continue to launch joint projects, supported by small grants. The program's network effects compounded over time. Each new cohort not only creates relationships among its 25 members but also gains access to the broader alumni network of previous cohorts. Second-generation and third-generation collaborations can then emerge as alumni from different years connect through the network. (See: [OneBeat Impact Report](#)).

Mesh networks offer powerful advantages for music diplomacy. They generate authentic partnerships based on artistic chemistry rather than institutional coordination. They enable creative innovation through diverse combinations of participants and ideas. They build resilience, as the network can continue functioning even if individual nodes become inactive. They create strong network effects, as each new participant potentially connects to all existing participants, exponentially increasing the network's value. And they can

scale organically, as alumni introduce new participants who become integrated into the expanding web.

The challenges of mesh networks include higher coordination complexity. Enabling peer-to-peer connections among many participants requires more sophisticated facilitation than hub-and-spoke models. They demand more resources per participant, as supporting deep collaborative work requires more time and intensive programming than performance tours. They can generate uneven outcomes, as not all pair connections will be equally productive or meaningful. And they require patience, as the most powerful network effects may take years to manifest as relationships deepen and second-generation collaborations emerge.

Clustered Networks: Regional Focus and Genre-Based Communities

When designing exchanges to address regional challenges or build communities around specific musical traditions, clustered networks offer yet another format. Clustered networks group participants into distinct communities while maintaining some connections between clusters.

[Sound Bridge](#) (2023-24), an initiative I co-designed with Found Sound Nation and funded by the U.S. Embassy in Armenia with support from U.S. Embassies in Türkiye and Georgia, demonstrates how regional clustering can activate network effects for conflict mitigation. The program convened musicians from Armenia, Türkiye, and Georgia to co-create original music facilitated by U.S. musicians. The regional structure created a cluster of South Caucasus and Turkish artists who share geographic proximity, overlapping musical traditions, and lived experience of regional conflict. Locating the exchange in Georgia, rather than sending the participants to the United States, created the opportunity for deep exploration of

shared heritage and co-existence. Georgia also served as a neutral location to bring together participants from Armenia and Türkiye who might otherwise not be able to travel to one another's country due to political tensions and restricted movement between Armenia and Türkiye.

Within this regional cluster, participants formed smaller working groups to create collaborative compositions. These micro-clusters enabled intensive creative work while the broader regional cohort provided diverse perspectives and peer support. This creates both the deep bonds of small, focused groups, and the broader reach of inter-cluster connections that bridge structural holes between otherwise disconnected communities (Burt, 1992). Public performances and digital storytelling then expanded reach beyond the participant cluster to broader audiences in all three countries. By centering artistic collaboration rather than political dialogue, Sound Bridge empowered artists to create their own vision of coexistence to be shared authentically with audiences. New content was shared through a [mixtape](#) released via Bandcamp, as well as music videos released and promoted via Found Sound Nation's social media channels e.g. Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. A few examples of recordings that emerged from this exchange include "[Şalik Şinokê// Mayroqe](#)," a song incorporating Armenian and Kurdish traditions recorded by 2024 participants, and "[Misty Road](#)," recorded by 2023 participants (Found Sound Nation, 2023, 2024).

Genre-based clustered networks provide focused community building within clusters while maintaining flexibility to bridge clusters. They enable exchanges to address specific regional or thematic challenges while creating potential for broader connections. While Sound Bridge successfully generated collaborative music and meaningful artist relationships, the program also revealed the limits of cultural exchange in addressing deep-seated conflict. When the U.S. Embassy in Armenia approached

local television stations about covering the program, they agreed to interview Armenian participants about their experiences but declined to broadcast the music videos featuring Turkish artists. Yet this partial reception still advanced the program's goals: Armenian audiences heard compelling testimony from their own artists about the power of collaboration, and the music videos found audiences online through social platforms as a result of the artists sharing them with their own networks. The interviews showed that even when institutions resist cross-border content, artists' credible voices can still reach publics with a message of possibility, underscoring how creative partnership and peaceful coexistence are not distant ideals but present realities.

Platform-Mediated and Scale-Free Networks

Two additional network models deserve mention for their potential in music diplomacy. Platform-mediated networks use digital technology to facilitate discovery, connection, and collaboration among geographically distributed participants. A well-designed digital platform can enable artists from different countries to discover each other's work, initiate collaborations, share resources, and maintain relationships over time. The platform serves as both a repository for exchange outputs—recordings, videos, documentation—and as an active space for ongoing collaboration. The power of platform-mediated networks lies in their ability to achieve scale. A digital platform can host thousands of artist profiles and creative works, enabling any participant to discover relevant collaborators or inspirational content. And the platform itself can serve as evidence of program impact, demonstrating the breadth of connections and collaborations facilitated over time.

However, platform-mediated networks face challenges. Building and maintaining effective platforms requires significant technical expertise and funding.

Platform adoption depends on achieving critical mass; the platform only becomes valuable when enough participants actively use it. Digital platforms may also privilege certain types of engagement while missing the depth of in-person collaboration. And platform dependency creates risk if the platform becomes unsustainable or inaccessible. A more cost-effective approach is to simply leverage existing music collaboration platforms.

Scale-free networks offer a different approach by leveraging highly connected influencer-artists to drive momentum. In scale-free networks, a small number of nodes have far more connections than typical participants. These super-connected nodes serve as hubs that can rapidly spread information, facilitate introductions, and mobilize communities. Including established artists with large followings and extensive professional networks in an exchange program can accelerate network growth and amplify reach. The benefits of incorporating scale-free elements include rapid network growth through influencer amplification, broader audience reach through influencer platforms, and mentorship opportunities for emerging artists. However, the risk is that they can destabilize a network through the inherent power imbalance they create.

Aligning Network Design with Policy Goals

Different foreign policy goals require different network structures. Selecting the right network structure begins with clarifying the desired outcome. Practitioners should identify the policy goal first and then design the exchange to activate the network effects best suited to achieving that objective. The following sections illustrate how to leverage network design across four distinct policy goals.

Economic Prosperity and Creative Industry Ties

To advance a policy goal of shared prosperity and building creative industry ties, music exchanges can foster partnerships in music production, distribution, and entrepreneurship to build sustainable creative economies. By connecting emerging and established artists, producers, and creative industry stakeholders, these programs enable co-creation, knowledge sharing, and market access. Collaborative clusters and platform-mediated networks can be optimized to enable joint projects and partnerships that amplify creative industry growth. For example, a program might bring together producers and sound engineers from different countries to share production techniques, collaborate on recordings, and establish cross-border production partnerships. Workshops on music business topics—copyright, distribution, marketing, touring—provide practical skills that enable artists to generate sustainable income from their work.

The U.S. State Department's [Next Level](#) exchange, implemented by Meridian International and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill demonstrated this approach through hip-hop collaborations that engaged underserved communities. Next Level sent American hip-hop artists to work with local communities in countries around the world, conducting workshops in production, DJing, break dance, and MC'ing (Katz, 2019). Participants gained technical skills in music production software, beat-making, and recording techniques. They also learned about the music industry, including how to distribute music, build audiences, and generate income through performances and licensing (Katz, 2019).

However, for creative economy programs to generate lasting impact, they must move beyond skills transfer to relationship building. Connecting local artists with

international producers creates opportunities for ongoing collaboration and access to global markets. Establishing partnerships between local creative industry organizations and international counterparts enables sustained knowledge exchange and business development. Creating platforms where artists can showcase their work to international audiences and industry professionals opens pathways to commercial opportunities.

Initiatives like [Ireland Music Week](#), a music festival and conference funded by Culture Ireland and the Irish Arts Council, organized by First Music Contact, is an example of such an initiative. The festival showcases export-ready talent to global audiences and industry professionals, enabling emerging artists to build and sustain careers in the music industry (Ireland Music Week, n.d.). Beyond showcasing artists, Ireland Music Week operates as network infrastructure, convening global industry gatekeepers in a structured matchmaking setting that lowers barriers to creative industry collaboration.

Network design for creative economy goals should prioritize professional connections over casual interactions. Consider including music industry professionals—label representatives, booking agents, and festival programmers—alongside artists. Create structured opportunities for portfolio reviews, demo submissions, and industry feedback. To facilitate business partnerships, connect producers with complementary technical skills or link artists with distributors or licensing agents who can help them reach new markets. These professional network connections often prove more valuable for economic development than artistic collaborations alone.

Peacebuilding, Conflict Mitigation, and Regional Stability

To support peacebuilding and conflict mitigation, practitioners can use music exchanges as neutral ground to build trust and understanding between communities in conflict. Residencies and joint performances bringing together artists from conflicting regions or groups can foster dialogue, empathy, and shared narratives. Mesh and clustered networks promote sustained relationships and collaborations that transcend divides, creating social bridges across conflict lines.

[Dosti Music Project](#) (2015-16), an initiative funded by the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad implemented by Found Sound Nation, demonstrated this approach by uniting Pakistani and Indian artists through shared musical heritage. Despite decades of conflict and political tension between their countries, Pakistani and Indian musicians share deep cultural connections through classical music traditions, Sufi devotional music, and popular film music. Dosti created space for artists to explore these shared traditions while acknowledging barriers created by partition and subsequent conflicts. The program brought together musicians for an extended residency in the United States, enabling creative collaboration. Participants then created original music that drew on shared traditions while addressing contemporary themes of connection. Public performances showcased collaborations, demonstrating to audiences that meaningful connection across the India-Pakistan divide are possible. Digital documentation extended the program's reach, enabling diaspora communities and international audiences to engage with the work. The result of these collaborations was captured in [Travelers](#), an album of original music created by the participants (Found Sound Nation, 2016).

[OneBeat Balkans](#) (2019), an initiative of the U.S. State Department also produced by Found Sound Nation with support from U.S. Embassies in Pristina, Kosovo, Tirana, Belgrade and North Macedonia, is another example of how music exchange can support regional reconciliation. The Balkans possesses extraordinary cultural richness, but this diversity has often been manipulated to emphasize divisions. OneBeat Balkans demonstrated how the region's musical traditions could instead become a foundation for social cohesion, bringing together musicians from countries across the former Yugoslavia to create collaborative works that honored their distinct traditions while building new shared culture (Found Sound Nation, n.d.).

For peace-building programs, network design must balance the vulnerability required for trust-building with the visibility needed for broader impact. Smaller, intensive residencies create safe spaces for vulnerable dialogue, deep listening, and relationship building. Public performances and media engagement demonstrate to broader society that collaboration across conflict lines is possible. Alumni networks sustain relationships and enable follow-on projects that continue the peacebuilding beyond the initial exchange.

Design considerations for conflict mitigation programs should include careful attention to timing, power dynamics, and historical trauma, recognizing that power asymmetries and cultural imperialism can emerge in exchanges in negative ways (Gienow-Hecht & Donfried, 2010). Programs must avoid forcing reconciliation or requiring that participants suppress grievances. Instead, they should create space for participants to engage authentically with shared heritage and difficult history. Effective music exchanges can navigate these tensions by engaging facilitators with experience in navigating power dynamics, conflict resolution, and trauma-informed practice. Program designers must be prepared for

unexpected challenges. Political events or personal histories may raise issues that require sensitive navigation.

Heritage Preservation and Cultural Innovation

Music exchanges can support intangible heritage preservation by celebrating and reinterpreting traditional musical forms while encouraging innovation and collaboration. This approach recognizes that cultural traditions remain vital when they evolve and adapt rather than simply being preserved (Handler & Linnekin, 1984). Collaborations that respect cultural heritage while appealing to contemporary audiences demonstrate how tradition and innovation can coexist. Clustered networks help maintain strong cultural identities within specific musical traditions, while mesh networks enable creative cross-pollination.

A 2024 [arts envoy tour](#) and exchange with Navajo band *Sihasin* that I produced with the U.S. Embassy in Armenia demonstrates this approach. *Sihasin* performs contemporary music rooted in Navajo cultural heritage, singing in both Navajo and English and addressing themes of Indigenous identity and cultural preservation. Their music honors Navajo culture while engaging with contemporary musical forms and social issues. During the Armenia exchange, *Sihasin* collaborated with Armenian artists to create new works incorporating Armenian language and traditional instruments alongside *Sihasin's* rock-influenced sound. The collaborations demonstrated respect for both Indigenous American and Armenian cultural heritage while creating something new. Public performances reached audiences with a message of respect for heritage preservation and the value of Indigenous knowledge and cultural practice in addressing contemporary challenges, which was particularly relevant following the displacement of ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh. The resulting recordings and videos,

in particular an Armenian remix of Sihasin's anthem, "[Shine](#)," continue to circulate online, reaching new audiences and generating conversations about cultural heritage and creative innovation. Through the exchange Armenian audiences discovered parallels between Armenian and Navajo experiences of cultural preservation after forced displacement, and global audiences encountered both traditions through the resulting collaborations (McAndrew, 2025).

Civic Engagement and Human Rights Advocacy

Mobilizing music as a medium to inspire civic engagement, human rights awareness, and community empowerment can occur when themes of solidarity, justice, and identity are embedded in collaborative works produced in exchanges. Platform-mediated and scale-free networks are potential models that can then amplify these messages to audiences, encouraging grassroots activism through music. To advance civic engagement goals, Embassies can host visiting artists for workshops, youth engagement, and public forums that integrate performances with dialogue. Rather than simply showcasing artistic work, these programs position music as a catalyst for conversation about social issues. Artists share knowledge from their lived experiences using music for social change in their home contexts, and collaborative creation enables participants to develop artistic works that reflect their own priorities and visions for change.

To address regional challenges or themes, several Embassies can jointly convene musicians on cross-border exchanges. One example of this is [OneBeat Sahara](#) (2022), an initiative of the U.S. Department of State produced by Bang on a Can's Found Sound Nation in partnership with U.S. Embassy Algeria, with support from U.S. Embassies in Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger and Tunisia. This initiative brought together musicians

from across North Africa to address themes of youth empowerment, human rights, and Black diasporic music traditions (Found Sound Nation, n.d.). The regional scope enabled participants to identify shared challenges while learning from different national contexts. Collaborative works created during the residency traveled throughout the region and globally through digital platforms.

Civic engagement programs benefit from incorporating educational components alongside artistic exchange. Workshops on topics such as community organizing, social media strategy for activism, or human rights documentation provide practical skills. Bringing together local activists, civil society leaders, or human rights advocates creates connections between artistic communities and activist networks. And creating opportunities for participants to perform at community gatherings integrates artistic practice with active civic engagement. Scale-free networks that leverage influential artists can rapidly amplify messages to large audiences, while mesh networks enable peer-to-peer organizing and mutual support among activists. The most effective programs combine these approaches, creating both tight-knit communities of practice and broad reach for social change messages.

Developing a Network Evaluation Framework

Effective evaluation to assess program impact serves multiple purposes. It demonstrates program value to funders and stakeholders, enables continued institutional support, and informs program refinement through continuous learning. It also documents impact over time, capturing both immediate outcomes and longer-term effects. A perennial challenge facing practitioners is the inherent difficulty of measuring soft power and relational change, particularly when outcomes are diffuse and

indirect (Belfiore & Bennett, 2010; Pamment, 2014; Sevin, 2015). For a deeper discussion of evaluation methodologies and tools for measuring soft power, recent studies by Pamment (2014) and Sevin (2015) may be useful to practitioners. However, if music exchanges are understood as network-building interventions rather than one-time cultural programs, evaluation must shift accordingly. When strategically designed, exchanges create relational ecosystems in which each new participant increases the overall value of the network. The question, therefore, is not whether an exchange was successful, but whether the network it generated produces compounding returns. Building on network science, a range of public diplomacy evaluation concepts, Zaharna's relational framework (2009), and collective impact theory (Kania & Kramer, 2011), this article proposes a network return-on-investment (ROI) evaluation model that organizes evaluation of exchanges across four dimensions: connectivity, collaboration, influence, and expansion. Together, these dimensions capture both structural and behavioral change of networks resulting from exchanges, as well as the longer-term embedding of exchange-generated relationships within institutional and public spheres.

Connectivity: Mapping Structural Change

The first dimension, connectivity, assesses whether the exchange alters the structure of relationships among participants and affiliated institutions. At its most basic level, connectivity concerns tie formation: how many new cross-border or cross-sector relationships emerged as a result of the program? More analytically, it involves examining changes in network density, the distribution of connections across participants, and the emergence of bridge actors linking otherwise disconnected communities. Social network analysis can provide useful methodology for mapping these structural shifts. Pre- and post-program surveys may reveal increases in cross-

border ties or cross-sector bridging between artists, policymakers, educators, and civil society actors.

Identifying central connectors within the network is particularly valuable. Certain participants may occupy bridging positions, linking subgroups and facilitating information flow across gaps. Recognizing these actors allows practitioners to allocate follow-on resources strategically and strengthen the network's resilience. Connectivity, therefore, measures whether the exchange successfully constructed relational infrastructure. It answers the foundational questions: was a new network created, or did the network become more connected as a result of the exchange?

Collaboration: Measuring Durability and Activation

Connectivity alone does not guarantee impact. The second dimension, collaboration, evaluates whether newly formed ties translate into sustained joint activity. In the context of music exchanges, this may include co-created songs, performances, recordings, or tours initiated during or after the exchange. It may also encompass joint grant proposals, institutional agreements, or cross-border artistic initiatives that extend beyond the program's formal duration. The durability of collaboration is also significant. Follow-up surveys conducted six months, one year, or longer after program completion can assess whether participants continue working together. Alumni interviews provide qualitative insight into how relationships evolved and what factors enabled sustained engagement. Evaluators should also examine second- and third-generation collaborations: instances in which alumni connect peers from different cohorts or introduce new actors into the network. Such downstream collaborations indicate that the network has moved beyond initial activation toward self-sustaining productivity.

Mapping the most active collaborators within the network further reveals where creative energy is concentrated. Participants who consistently initiate or facilitate joint projects function as multipliers or super-connectors, generating disproportionate relational value (Pamment, 2014). Supporting these actors can amplify overall network performance. Collaboration metrics thus assess whether relationships are not only formed but activated into meaningful, durable output. However, practitioners should keep in mind that these network effects often manifest in timescales long past a typical evaluation window—especially in conflict affected regions.

Influence: Audience Reach, Media Framing, and Public Impact

The third dimension, influence, captures how network activity extends beyond direct participants to shape broader cultural, institutional, or public environments. Whereas connectivity and collaboration focus on internal network dynamics, influence examines external effects. Audience engagement is one important indicator. Total attendance at exchange events, digital streaming numbers, video views, and social media interaction provide measures of reach. Yet sustained engagement over time—rather than short-term visibility—offers stronger evidence of influence. Tracking whether collaborative works continue to attract audiences months or years after their creation can reveal the durability of cultural resonance. Geographic distribution of audiences further indicates whether exchange outputs are reaching transnational publics, diaspora communities, or previously unconnected regions.

Media coverage, agenda-setting, and framing also shape influence (Entman, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Coverage that highlights post-conflict collaboration, professional development, or shared cultural production

reinforces the relational aims of the exchange, whereas superficial mentions may generate visibility without deepening understanding. Sentiment analysis and qualitative review of media narratives can illuminate how exchange activities are interpreted within public discourse. Quantitative indicators should be complemented by qualitative assessment. Participant surveys can measure perceived growth in cultural understanding, trust, and professional opportunity. Case studies documenting conflict resolution, civic engagement, or institutional change facilitated by exchange relationships provide contextual depth. These narratives reveal the mechanisms through which network influence operates and help trace pathways from relational connection to broader social or policy impact.

Expansion: Institutionalization and Compounding Growth

The final dimension, expansion, evaluates whether the network grows autonomously and becomes embedded within institutional structures. Network expansion signals the transition from program-dependent activity to self-sustaining ecosystem. Institutional partnerships provide one indicator of expansion. Exchanges often catalyze relationships with universities, cultural organizations, media outlets, and governmental bodies. The depth of these partnerships matters. Co-funding arrangements, joint programming, or formal agreements represent stronger institutionalization than one-time collaborations. When partner organizations integrate alumni into curricula, programming, or advisory structures, the network extends into new constituencies and acquires structural durability.

Alumni network activation offers another measure of expansion. Formal alumni platforms can track engagement in follow-on projects, mentorship relationships, and cross-cohort collaboration. Social

network analysis may reveal increasing density across cohorts or the emergence of regional clusters operating independently. Indicators of sustainability include repeat program cycles, spin-off initiatives inspired by the exchange, and funding secured for continued activity. Less tangible forms of embedding are equally significant: alumni who continue to identify with the exchange community years later, collaborations integrated into ongoing professional practice, or policy dialogues that last beyond the original program context. Expansion captures the compounding quality of network effects. It addresses the ultimate evaluative question: is the network generating new value independently of continued program funding?

From Exchanges to Ecosystems

This framework departs from traditional evaluation in a few fundamental ways. First, it shifts the unit of analysis from individual participants or discrete outputs to the network as a whole. Second, it extends the time period beyond program completion to capture compounding effects that may take years to materialize, which is important in conflict-affected contexts where trust develops slowly. Third, it redefines success not as participant satisfaction or simple outputs/outcomes, but as the creation of self-sustaining relational infrastructure that continues producing value autonomously. Where conventional evaluation metrics ask: “how many people attended?” or “were participants satisfied?”, network ROI asks: “is the system generating new connections without continued intervention?” Organizing evaluation around the dimensions of connectivity, collaboration, influence, and expansion operationalizes this reframing. It recognizes that network effects frequently unfold beyond conventional reporting cycles. By documenting structural change, collaboration, public influence, and autonomous growth, practitioners can demonstrate that music exchanges produce soft power influence not just in the

immediate aftermath of an exchange, but in the sustained evolution and output of relationship ecosystems.

Implementation: From Design to Delivery

Budget Considerations and Resource Allocation

Budget requirements vary significantly based on program scope, number of participants, geographic location, and network model. Key budget categories include participant support (artist fees, travel, accommodation, per diem), program delivery (venue rental, equipment, facilitation, technical support), documentation and media (professional recording, video production, photography), communication and outreach (media engagement, social media management, promotional materials), evaluation (survey instruments, data collection, analysis), and alumni support (micro-grants, reunion events). Approximately 15-20% of budget should be allocated to professional documentation. High-quality recordings and video production ensure outputs resonate with audiences and respects artists' professional standards. Quality content has staying power and becomes an enduring asset for reaching new audiences and demonstrating program value to funders.

A modest hub-and-spoke exchange bringing a single ensemble to perform in a few cities might operate on a budget of \$100,000 to \$150,000 USD, covering artist fees, travel, accommodation, venue costs, and basic documentation. This budget level supports limited collaboration but can achieve meaningful audience influence. Mid-scale mesh network programs bringing 15-25 participants together for intensive residencies typically require \$250,000 to \$300,000 USD. These budgets accommodate international travel for multiple participants, extended accommodation during residency

periods, professional facilitation, recording and documentation, public performances, and post-program alumni support. Large-scale programs with multiple cohorts, extensive travel, professional recording, and sustained alumni programming may require \$500,000 USD or more. These programs can achieve significant scale and create robust network infrastructure but demand substantial organizational capacity and sustained funding commitment.

Participant Selection Strategies

Participant selection profoundly shapes program outcomes. Selection processes should balance artistic excellence, collaborative capacity, and professional reliability, with alignment with program goals. The most high-profile musicians may not always be the most effective collaborators or the most reliable participants. Conversely, highly professional and reliable artists may lack the creative vision or risk-taking spirit that generates innovative collaborations. Consider creating selection criteria that assesses multiple dimensions. Artistic quality and accomplishment remain important but should be evaluated alongside collaborative experience, cross-cultural competence, communication skills, and professional track record. Request work samples demonstrating both individual artistry and collaborative projects. Conduct interviews to assess interpersonal skills and program alignment.

For network-building programs, assess participants' existing networks and potential to serve as network bridges. Artists with substantial followings, established institutional relationships, or connections to specific communities can amplify program impact. Balance established artists with emerging voices to generate mentorship relationships and ensure the network incorporates fresh perspectives. Diversity across multiple dimensions strengthens networks. Consider diversity of

musical genres and traditions, career stages, gender and other identity dimensions, geographic regions and communities, and professional backgrounds (performers, producers, educators, activists). Diverse cohorts generate more creative friction and innovation while modeling inclusive collaboration.

Risk Management and Network Resilience

Music exchanges present unique challenges that can undermine network formation and sustainability. Effective risk management protects not just individual program activities, but the relational infrastructure exchanges aim to build. The most critical risks are those that fracture emerging networks, erode trust between participants, or prevent the activation of newly formed connections.

Participant Attrition and Network Fragmentation

Participant dropouts represent one of the most common threats to network integrity. Illness, family emergencies, visa denials, or professional conflicts can remove participants even after significant planning. More critically, dropouts can fragment collaborative clusters or remove bridge actors connecting different subgroups. Build redundancy into participant selection by maintaining a list of alternates matched not just for artistic skill but for their potential network position—can they fill the structural role of the person they are replacing? Consider whether programs can adapt if key connectors cannot attend: can collaborations be reconfigured to maintain network cohesion, or will certain participants become isolated?

Political Disruption and Network Trust

External political events pose particular risks to network-building exchanges focused on conflict mitigation. The Sound Bridge program, for example, faced

recruitment difficulties when renewed hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh led Armenian participants to question whether collaboration with Turkish artists was appropriate in that period. Such moments can sever fragile cross-cultural ties before they solidify. Transparent communication about program goals and participant agency helps navigate these situations while preserving trust—the foundation of any durable network. Create space for participants to raise concerns, adapt program framing if needed, and acknowledge that legitimate political and ethical considerations may affect participation. The goal is not to eliminate risk but to ensure that network relationships can weather external pressures rather than collapse under them.

Interpersonal Conflict and Network Toxicity

Creative disagreements and interpersonal tensions emerge during intensive collaborative processes. While some creative tension strengthens networks by deepening engagement, unresolved conflicts can create toxic nodes that repel other participants and fragment the broader network. Skilled facilitation helps groups navigate conflict constructively. Establish clear communication channels for participants to raise concerns. Build time for processing and reflection alongside creative work. Monitor not just whether conflicts exist but whether they're creating network avoidance patterns. Are certain participants being excluded from collaborations, are subgroups forming that refuse to work together?

Institutional Constraints and Network Authenticity

Political sensitivities surrounding genre, lyrics, historical narratives, or artist backgrounds can create tensions that constrain how networks function. Overly scripted programs risk producing inauthentic relationships. Participants may form connections during the program but fail to activate them afterward because

the collaboration felt forced or externally controlled.

Effective network design therefore requires proactive engagement with institutional partners to understand constraints and identify acceptable approaches. When restrictions exist, they should be communicated clearly during recruitment rather than imposed mid-program. At the same time, organizers must assess whether constraints are so severe that they undermine the authenticity necessary for genuine relationship formation. Networks built on coerced or performative collaboration rarely generate sustained activity once external structure is removed.

Returning to the Sound Bridge case underscores how institutional constraints shape the conditions under which authentic networks can form. The official policy of the Turkish government at the time of the program rejected the characterization of the 1915 mass killings of Armenians as genocide, and public acknowledgment of that term by Turkish citizens can carry legal, professional, and personal risks. Requiring participants to adopt a particular political position on the genocide as a condition of participation in the exchange would therefore have placed Turkish artists in an untenable position and likely foreclosed the possibility of collaboration altogether. As a result, the program did not mandate public discussion or recognition of the issue. Instead, it created a structured but non-prescriptive environment in which artists could determine for themselves whether and how to address historical tensions in private dialogue. While the unresolved political dispute remains a structural barrier to cross-border artistic collaboration, allowing participants autonomy in navigating sensitive issues preserved the authenticity of relationships and enabled cooperation that might otherwise have been impossible.

Building Adaptive Networks

The most resilient networks are those designed with flexibility from the outset. Budget constraints that force premature choices between depth and reach can produce networks too shallow to activate or too narrow to expand. Consider how resource allocation affects network structure: distributed budgets that empower participants to initiate their own collaborations may produce more resilient networks than centralized programming. Similarly, building multiple connection points between participants—pairing artists for specific collaborations while also creating opportunities for broader group interaction—ensures that the loss of any single participant doesn't sever critical network pathways.

Balancing Artistic Freedom and Diplomatic Objectives

The tension between diplomatic objectives and artistic freedom directly affects network formation and sustainability. Network theory suggests that nodes (participants) with genuine agency are more likely to activate relationships authentically and draw new actors into the ecosystem. Conversely, top-down control produces compliance rather than commitment. Participants may complete program requirements but fail to leverage relationships afterward because the collaboration felt imposed rather than organic.

Rather than prescribing specific messages or outputs, establish broad themes and invite artists to respond through their creative work. For a heritage preservation program, the theme might be exploring tradition and innovation. Participants then determine how to interpret the theme, forming connections based on genuine creative alignment rather than assigned partnerships. For a civic engagement program, the theme might be music and social change. Participants choose which social issues to address, naturally clustering

around shared interests. These emergent clusters often become the most active subnetworks within the broader exchange ecosystem.

Provide clear guidance about constraints while maximizing creative agency within those parameters. Transparency allows participants to make informed decisions about how to position themselves within the network. If certain topics are politically sensitive, communicate this during recruitment and work with artists to identify approaches that serve both their artistic visions and diplomatic feasibility. If specific outputs are required, collaborate with artists on format and content rather than imposing predetermined structures.

Leveraging Authentic Voices: Artist-Led Content Distribution

Respecting artist ownership of creative work affects network growth. To ensure content is perceived as authentic rather than government messaging, artists and/or implementing partners should lead the release of content, with an Embassy serving as an amplifier rather than the primary broadcaster. Respecting artist ownership of creative work directly impacts network growth. When participants retain rights to compositions and recordings, they are more motivated to promote outputs through their own networks, significantly extending the exchange's reach. Proper attribution reinforces participants' professional standing, making them more attractive collaborators for future projects. Supporting artists in sharing work through their own channels (decentralized distribution through motivated nodes) is far more effective than a top-down broadcast from a single source. When artists lack ownership or feel their autonomy was compromised, they become inactive nodes—structurally connected but behaviorally disengaged—limiting the network's capacity to expand.

Ten Principles for Network-Oriented Music Diplomacy

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks and strategies discussed, the following ten principles provide a roadmap for designing music exchanges that generate lasting impact through network effects.

1. Align Design with Policy Goals

Begin by identifying your policy goal—peacebuilding, creative industry ties, civic engagement, or heritage preservation—then select the network structure that best activates those objectives. Let the goal drive the design rather than selecting a network model first and then fitting policy goals to it. Different objectives require different network architectures, participant profiles, and program structures. Clarity about goals enables strategic choices throughout the design process.

2. Foster Deep Collaboration

Build structured co-creation time into the program through songwriting sessions, workshops, and joint projects. Collaboration transforms a performance tour into a sustainable network by creating shared ownership, building trust through vulnerability, and generating creative outputs that participants want to continue developing. Allocate significant time for collaborative work. Rushing creative process produces superficial results while patient facilitation enables deep connection. Build time for informal relationship-building alongside formal presentations to audiences.

3. Invest in Network Infrastructure

Create mechanisms to sustain connections after the exchange through alumni platforms, micro grants follow-on collaborations, and reunion events. The exchange is the spark; the network infrastructure keeps it burning. Without intentional infrastructure and funding for maintaining relationships, even powerful initial connections may fade. Digital platforms enable ongoing communication, small grants provide resources for continued collaboration, and reunion events can regenerate momentum.

4. Leverage Network Hubs and Anchors

Identify and invest in participants who can serve as network connectors: artists with both creative credibility and the ability to mobilize audiences through an established fan base. These network hubs amplify program impact by bringing their existing networks into relationship with exchange networks. Balance emerging artists who benefit from mentorship with established figures who can open doors. Effective programs can benefit from both emerging and established participants. Anchor the network in institutions that can lend credibility and longevity to the network, such as conservatories and music schools.

5. Combine Network Structures Strategically

Combine network models intentionally to capture the benefits of different approaches. Center Stage's hub-and-spoke model incorporated some mesh network elements by fostering collaborations between ensemble members and local artists. Sound Bridge combined clustered network structure for regional focus with mesh network dynamics enabling peer-to-peer collaboration. Sophisticated network design often requires hybrid

approaches that adapt multiple models to specific contexts and goals.

6. Design for Network Longevity

Incentivize and reward contribution to the network by offering micro grants, travel stipends or production support for follow-on collaborations. Monitor network growth by building evaluation of the four dimensions—connectivity, collaboration, influence and expansion—into program design. Use data to demonstrate value and secure future funding. Conduct follow-up evaluation at multiple time points—immediate post-program, six months later, one year later—to capture both immediate outcomes and long-term effects. Longitudinal data provides the most compelling evidence of enduring impact.

7. Invest in Professional Documentation

Budget for professional-quality recording and video production of collaborations. High production value ensures outputs resonate with audiences and respects artists' professional standards. Quality content has staying power and becomes an enduring asset for reaching new audiences and demonstrating program value to funders. Be strategic about what to document. Prioritize collaborative creative processes, public performances featuring exchange-generated work, and participant reflections on their experiences.

8. Extend Reach Through Digital Platforms

Use social media and digital networks to extend audience reach beyond one-time exchanges and performances. Encourage participants to share behind-the-scenes content from collaborative processes, creating authentic documentation that resonates with digital audiences. Maintain online communities where

alumni can continue collaborations. Release mixtapes, playlists and music videos of content created in the exchange on platforms like YouTube, Bandcamp, or Spotify. Digital platforms transform a time-bound exchange into an ongoing conversation, enabling continuous network growth. Strategic use of hashtags, collaborative social posting, and cross-promotion amplifies digital reach.

9. Manage Risks Proactively

Anticipate potential challenges—political tensions, participant dropouts, creative disagreements—and build in flexibility to adapt. Establish clear communication channels where participants can raise concerns. Develop contingency plans for likely disruptions. Balance risk awareness with support for creative expression, ensuring the exchange can adapt without compromising relationships or authentic artistic outcomes. Communicate transparently with participants about constraints while maximizing creative agency within those parameters.

10. Build in Flexibility

Provide structure while allowing space for organic growth and unexpected partnerships. Sound Bridge's approach of inviting participants to shape their own vision of coexistence fostered authentic relationships that endured beyond the exchange. The most valuable collaborations often emerge spontaneously when artists discover unexpected creative chemistry or shared interests. Resist the temptation to over-program every moment. Build unstructured time for informal relationship building. Trust participants' creative judgment about what collaborations to pursue and how to develop them.

Conclusion

Funding music exchanges—and soft power initiatives more broadly—is increasingly challenging in an era of constrained budgets and shifting national priorities that favor hard power and transactional relationships over cultural diplomacy. Shifting from performance-centered to network-centered music diplomacy offers a more compelling framework for demonstrating impact to skeptical funders and provides a richer evidence base for the value of cultural investment. By prioritizing lasting relationships, collaboration, and sustainable networks, programs can generate influence that extends well beyond individual performances. This approach requires clear policy goals and intentional network infrastructure that fosters both planned outcomes and unexpected collaborations. The future of music diplomacy lies not in bigger performances with more prestigious artists, but in deeper networks, authentic partnerships, and resilient creative ecosystems, where meaningful relationships, creative outputs, and engaged audiences sustain influence across borders and time.

Author's Biography

Jen McAndrew is Senior Director of Events at Berklee College of Music, where she leverages a distinguished diplomatic career to advance global connections through the arts. Prior to Berklee, she served as a U.S. Foreign Service Officer for seventeen years (2009-26), leading strategic communications, public diplomacy initiatives, and flagship exchange programs—including managing Fulbright scholarships internationally. Her diplomatic postings spanned U.S. Embassies in Armenia, Ireland, Pakistan, and Israel, as well as the Washington Foreign Press Center. She also taught cultural diplomacy tradecraft at the Foreign Service Institute.

Throughout her career, Jen applied network theory, ethnomusicology, and conflict resolution to design high-impact exchanges. Key initiatives included: securing the first-ever Pakistani music [showcase](#) at SXSW, launching the *Dosti* music [exchange](#), curating the *Creative Minds* [series](#) in Ireland, creating the *Sound Bridge* [exchange](#) in the Caucasus, and brokering the American University of Armenia and Washington State University partnership to launch a new graduate [program](#) in journalism. Jen currently serves on the board of the Lois Roth Foundation.

She holds an MA in Cultural Policy & Arts Management from University College Dublin, an MA in Mass Communication from Texas State University, and a BA in Irish Studies from Southwestern University. She began her career in public affairs at the University of Texas at Austin.

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