

# Web Memo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1115  
June 7, 2006

## State Department Ponders Expediency over Effectiveness on Exchanges

*Stephen Johnson and James Jay Carafano, Ph.D.*

After the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) and its own inspector general faulted the U.S. Department of State for failing to oversee summer work and training exchanges for foreigners, the State Department plans to cut back a program it can't seem to manage. At issue is the Exchange Visitor Program, authorized by the 1961 Fulbright-Hays Act (PL 87-256) and now administered by the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA). It brings approximately 275,000 students, scholars, trainees, and interns to the United States annually.

Thousands of employers also participate in the Summer Work Travel and the Trainee programs. Employers include corporations, architectural firms, hotels, restaurants, development organizations, airlines, investment and financial services entities, and manufacturing companies.

Most of these exchanges are privately funded, but the State Department is charged with ensuring that visitors who come to experience American culture and learn the ways of U.S. industry are not turned into low wage workers or unpaid help, or abused in any other way.

### What's Wrong

According to the GAO, the State Department ensures compliance with program regulations mainly by reviewing annual reports provided by sponsors. State officials rarely visit sponsors to observe program activities or verify data that they provide. In the past four years, State officials have visited only eight of its 206 Summer Work Travel and/or Trainee sponsors.

Moreover, sponsors themselves are responsible for notifying State of any serious problems.

The GAO uncovered trainee applicants who said they were going to the United States to work as kitchen help and waiters—hardly an experience likely to win hearts and minds. Their sponsor claimed another organization was responsible for their selection and placement. In another case, the Department double-checked a sponsor's Web site and discovered that it was a topless bar.

State says staffing caps and scarce travel funds limit intensive sponsor monitoring. The Office of Exchange Coordination and Designation has only five program officers who serve as contacts and are responsible for the day-to-day management of 13 exchange programs.

Unstated in the GAO and inspector general reviews is that Congress typically underfunds the State Department. Instead of keeping lawmakers informed of its needs, however, the Department's Legislative Affairs Bureau spends most of its time filtering communication between its offices and the Capitol—to keep hapless State employees from saying something to Hill staffers that might endanger the status quo.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
<http://www.heritage.org/research/nationalsecurity/wm1115.cfm>

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 · [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

**The Response**

Rather than devise ways in which it could oversee the Summer Work Travel and the Trainee program better, the ECA proposed new rules to reduce its own load by cutting the number of international students and young professionals coming to the United States as interns or trainees.

New regulations would ban internships for undergraduate students and force U.S. sponsors to conduct expensive screening interviews overseas. Interns would have to achieve the same language aptitude score required for a college degree program, instead of communicative competence. Repeat or serial training programs would be eliminated.

All of these factors would restrict access to a program that provides flexible opportunities for substantive, positive experiences in the U.S. and would deprive American firms both the chance to showcase American techniques and values and opportunities to identify talent from around the world.

The Alliance for International Educational and Cultural Exchange, an organization devoted to promoting overseas exchanges, complains that the ECA response would counter Bush administration goals to strengthen U.S. public diplomacy programs. The U.S. public diplomacy mission fell into disarray when the U.S. Information Agency was merged into the State Department in 1999. Shortly thereafter, foreign exchanges reached a ten-year numerical low.

**A Better Fix**

To its credit, the State Department notified U.S. sponsors of its rule proposals and offered a 60-day comment period during April and May. That period closed June 6, 2006. According to the Department, numerous sponsors complained loudly about restricting foreign undergraduate internships in the United States.

Like the J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarships and other exchange programs, the Summer Work Travel Program should be guided by a comprehensive strategy that will strengthen person-to-person relations with individual visitors from foreign nations. As part of such a strategy, State's ECA bureau should receive personnel and funds to exercise adequate oversight, while trainees and interns must have a dedicated complaint system to voice concerns when sponsors depart the parameters envisioned by the program.

Both Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy Karen Hughes should make it clear to senior Department career managers that improving the quality and content of exchanges is part of the Bush administration's plan to revitalize State's weak public diplomacy function. Furthermore, strengthening public diplomacy is essential to winning the global war on terror.

**Conclusion**

The State Department's senior careerists are right to propose changes that would eliminate waste, fraud, and abuse in the exchange visitor program. However, cutting it back because it doesn't fit State's core mission of traditional diplomacy or simply to relieve an administrative headache may not be in the country's best interest. Perhaps the Department's political leadership and Congress need to weigh in more heavily in this decision.

*[Stephen Johnson](#) is Senior Policy Analyst in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, and [James Jay Carafano, Ph.D.](#), is Senior Research Fellow for Defense and Homeland Security in the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*