



**U.S. Department of State
Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
Private Sector Exchange**

May 21, 2012

Dear Exchange Visitor Program Sponsor:

On February 13, I was sworn in as the Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) for Private Sector Exchange in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) at the Department of State. With three months under my belt, my enthusiasm about private sector exchange programs remains high. I am pleased for the opportunity to work on these programs because I believe the Exchange Visitor Program provides true global value to American public diplomacy. I have seen this first-hand both from home and abroad.

I am excited about the opportunities this diverse program presents, and am fully aware of the challenges that lie ahead. Shortly after my arrival, I directed my staff to begin a re-evaluation of our overall mission and the objectives we are pursuing through private sector exchanges. Our team is working to strengthen what is already an extraordinary program filled with limitless possibilities for public diplomacy. To that end, we have put in place a number of new internal protocols and we are working closely with the Department of State bureaus responsible for regional affairs to ensure our programs support U.S. foreign policy objectives. We are also working with these bureaus to identify and engage Exchange Visitor Program alumni when they return to their home countries, to multiply overall alumni outreach. I expect that our work will improve the visibility and long-term dividends of our programs overall.

The Exchange Visitor Program requires partnership with many stakeholders. Consistency, transparency, and communication with the cultural exchange communities are high priorities for me. As I work to strengthen communication with sponsors, I will endeavor to be straightforward with you about your strengths, as well as areas for improvements. I will also listen to and consider your feedback. For example, earlier this year some sponsors requested an adjustment to the beginning and end dates for the Summer Work Travel Program. After a thorough review, we amended the date chart and notified all sponsors of the new applicable dates. Last month, I also conducted a conference call with high school sponsors to talk about my vision for that program. I plan to continue this outreach with sponsors in each exchange category in the coming months.

Privately-funded exchanges can be a wonderful way for foreign students and professionals to learn about our country. Each category offers a different opportunity to experience the United States and its diversity. Our vision for exchange programs is to provide a means for interested youth and professionals to gain personal experience and familiarity with the United States and its people, to improve their command of the English language, and to have a great time. If we achieve all of this, our participants will enjoy positive memories for the rest of their lives, and the power of exchanges will be realized.

I intend to ensure that each of our programs is fully compatible with a cultural exchange. As Summer Work Travel sponsors have seen, our new May 11 Interim Final Rule focused greatly on re-establishing the cultural component as central to the program. We also focused on improving protections for health, safety and welfare. We are finalizing an evaluation schedule for all exchange categories, similar to the review we just completed for Summer Work Travel, with the goal of issuing notices of proposed rulemaking to re-affirm the cultural component of exchanges and strengthen oversight and compliance. The cultural exchange element must be at the core in each category, and each program must live up to its cultural requirement and potential.

Sponsors play a significant role in making sure the Exchange Visitor Program is the most rewarding cultural experience possible for participants. Our joint efforts are key to meeting American public diplomacy goals. We already have numerous examples of best practices and excellence from sponsors in all categories. I hope that, as this year unfolds, we will have many more to showcase. I invite input on your efforts to reach the gold standard in your programs and efforts. Together, the Department and the sponsor community can develop innovative and effective ways to introduce exchange participants to a broad range of positive American experiences.

I look forward to working with you to enrich international exchanges.

With best wishes,



Robin J. Lerner
Deputy Assistant Secretary
for Private Sector Exchange