

TECH|NOCULTURE

Fulbright and international exchange programs

Episode 36

Full transcript

Guest: Rick A. Ruth [Rick]

Host: Federica Bressan [Federica]

[Federica]: Welcome to a new episode of Technoculture. I'm your host, Federica Bressan, and today my guest is Rick Ruth, Senior Advisor at the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State. Rick is a specialist in international exchange programs. Welcome Rick!

[Rick]: Thank you very much.

[Federica]: You spent most of your life working with exchange programs. Can you talk a little bit about what these programs are and what it means to work with exchange programs?

[Rick]: What it means to work with exchange programs is to be optimistic, is to believe in the better part of human nature, and that we can all work together towards that. One of the things that I have liked best about a career in international exchanges is the kind of people who are engaged in it, which is a large large number of people from many diverse backgrounds, but they all have this sense that they want to be able to go home, as the cliché goes, "at the end of the day," and say they did something, however modest, however incremental, to make the world a better place. Now, in America we might say that sounds corny, meaning it sounds a little bit foolish, a little bit overly optimistic, but in fact it's the kind of thing that we believe in. It's the kind of thing that people who belong to humanitarian organizations, assistance organizations, the Red Cross, the Peace Corps, they all believe that while you have to make a living, it's also important to do something that makes the world a little bit of a better place every day. And that's the purpose behind exchanges.

[Federica]: Who is the target of these programs? Who are they for?

[Rick]: Well, we are the U.S. Government, we're not in a university, we're not an independent foundation. So all the work that we do does advance the American international interest in the world, and it does align with American foreign policy. But having said that, we engage all audiences, usually as young as 14 or 15, that's sort of the youngest age we engage, and then most of our participants, probably 75-80% of them, are between high school, secondary school age, and their early, mid-30s. We do have programs with older individuals, but mostly we're looking at that demographic for secondary school, college undergraduate, university graduate students.

[Federica]: I don't know how many programs you have, but I'm sure that there are many: do they all look alike?

[Rick]: We have a great many different programs, that's right, and they don't all look alike, although they all involve the human dimension and that is the essential element. The contribution that exchanges make is that they all involve human beings and we hope for the better. We have scores of different programs and they're all designed to respond to a particular need, a particular purpose. So, for example after 9/11, which was the attack on the World Trade Center and other parts of the United States, we got together at the Bureau of Educational Cultural Affairs, as people did throughout the United States, to ask themselves "What can we do? How do we respond to this?" We had a particular urgency at the Bureau, because our motto, if you will, is mutual understanding, and there's no greater affront to mutual understanding than terrorism. So, clearly it was up to us to do something and it needed to be lasting. It needed to be significant. It needed to be meaningful, it couldn't just be a conference or something like that. So what we did was, we created the U.S. Government's first high school exchange program for the Arab and Muslim world. It began in 2003. It's continued ever since and has had over 12,000 participants now. So this has been a mechanism for people from all around the Arab and Muslim world to come to the United States find out who we are, learn about us, live here for an entire year with an American family, going to an American high school. And it has worked out the way we had hoped. With any luck, that's the kind of program we'll always have, for whatever the need is, whatever the audience is, we'll be able to put together and get funded that kind of program to bring people together continuously over time.

[Federica]: This high school exchange program came at a time where there was a spike in negative sentiments towards certain areas of the world, people with a certain religion, certain ethnicities. So, how did you get this done, then? Was it hard to receive support?

[Rick]: With the question, for example, of how we started a program for the Arab and Muslim world (which is a term I use generically, obviously it's an overly simplistic term, but for

for the sake of discussion,) we understood that there would be a lot of concern, a lot of worry on the part of Arab countries, Muslim countries, about sending young people to the United States, when there certainly was in some parts of America a very negative reaction to the terrorists, who were Arab, who were Muslim, and that not just ministries of education and foreign governments, but just parents would say “my son, my daughter, I don’t think I’m comfortable with him spending an entire year in the United States.” So, soon after 9/11, I’m not sure what kind of reception or treatment they were going to have. On the one level, we thought, since we’re professionals in this area, it’s what we do, that that’s exactly when you need to do it, you need to do it when things are the most difficult, when they are the most challenging. But we also did not know whether it would succeed. It had never been done before, we have done other exchange programs, other high school exchange programs in other parts of the world, but not one in this kind of context. And we worried about everything, we tried to imagine every detail. For example, I’ve lived in the Muslim world, and dogs are not generally popular; for example, usually most young men and women in most Muslim countries will not have ever had a dog in their house. Well, if you’re talking about Americans, I don’t know, you may have encountered this already, every other person has a dog, if not two or three of them. So, even though this may sound like foolishness, one of the things that we worked on was to make sure that when we’re bringing a young person from North Africa to Nevada... is the host family in America, do they have a dog? And we need to tell them this, and say, you’re going to get there, you know there’s a mother, and a father, and two brothers, and a daughter. But you also have to know there’s a dog. Are you comfortable with that? And tell the American family this new student, this new young person, who’s going to live with you for a year, they’re not used to dogs, doesn’t mean they’re afraid of them necessarily, but they’re absolutely not used to them, and you don’t let the dog just, you know, run up to them and jump on them, all kinds of, I mean, we also worried about much larger things as well. But just to give you an example of how we tried to consider every imaginable detail to make this program as successful as possible. And we also worried about, you know, religious values, conservative values, social values, the role of women in society, and so forth. And what we found out over the years is that the single number one concern had nothing to do with politics, nothing to do with religion. It was simply parents letting go of their most precious possession in the world, one of their children for a year in a foreign country. And once we were able to explain how carefully we choose the American host families, how we make sure that everything is going to be fine, how we choose the school and all of these other issues, you know, talking about pets in the house is just an example of how carefully we looked at everything, once the program began and once the students then had the initial experience and began going back home to their countries, then we were fine because they came back and said “it’s a great program, and there was no problem, and people did not insult me on the street, people did not treat me badly because I was Muslim or because I was Arab.” It’s just people. Because that again is the essence of exchanges, is, again, you bring people together on the basis of mutual respect in a context of cooperative work and cooperative study and it works fine.

[Federica]: The high school exchange program you just mentioned seems to be only one-way, for people to come to the United States. Are most programs one-way, also maybe just outgoing, or there are also two-way programs?

[Rick]: We have both one-way and two-way programs. The yes program which is now called the Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study program, because two American senators, one in each party, one Democrat one Republican, were so supportive of the program that they put their names to it, and helped us obtain the funding for it. Now, it's very popular throughout Congress, so the funding is never a concern. And it's primarily students from other countries coming to the United States. That's the primary intent of the program. But we have started a small reciprocal program where American high school students will spend a year overseas as well, learning about those other countries.

[Federica]: These programs, as well as others, have not started at the same point in time. Some are older, some are more recent. They have been designed in different conditions. However, they all seem to share the same core value that is mutual understanding. It's always about the people. And I find that fascinating.

[Rick]: Yes. Well, you know, people don't change the way technology changes. Obviously, if we took a cell phone or mobile phone in a time machine back a thousand years, nobody would know what to do with it, there wouldn't even be electricity to run it. Of course, that's a foolish notion. We understand that. But if you and I were to go back in time a thousand years, we wouldn't be able to survive either, because we wouldn't know how to grow food or hunt or gather and anything. So we can see technology change very rapidly over time, but people don't change that way. If you go back in time and read ancient poetry, if you read the Song of Solomon and it says "thou art fair, my love; thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes," we get that, we know what they were talking about back then, and we would say the same thing right now, with the same meaning, and the same effect. So, we rely on the fact that there's only so many different ways to bring people together. And if you bring them together on an attitude, on the level of mutual understanding and mutual respect, almost every single time they will leave that contact, that engagement, that experience, knowing each other better, respecting each other more, distrusting each other less. That's good for the world that's good for America. That's good for everybody.

[Federica]: Yes. Provided that mutual understanding and a focus on people is a constant in these programs, what may the circumstances be that call for a new program? When is a new program designed and set up?

[Rick]: It's my personal belief, and this is mine, that exchanges - by the U.S. government

but also by others - are primarily created when there is a crisis, when there is a conflict, when there is some kind of challenge or difficulty in the world. And that there are people who will step up and try and address that problem, they will try and do something about that problem. For example the oldest partner that our State Department has in high school exchange is over 100 years old. It's the American Field Service, AFS as it's called now, and it has that rather unique name because it was created by American volunteers in World War I who drove ambulances, and staffed field hospitals in France in World War I. And they were so appalled by the carnage of the war that they came together and said, we have to do something about this. And so they created a mechanism to bring young people in both directions, so they would get to know each other better and hopefully not fight each other again. Understanding that was a very ambitious objective, but one they wanted to work towards. World War II brought us the Fulbright program. Senator Jay William Fulbright of Arkansas was thinking about the terrible destruction of World War II in the same way that earlier Americans who had been in World War I were thinking about that destruction. He was particularly struck by the terrible power, the frightening power of atomic weapons which we had used against Japan to end World War II in the Pacific. And while he was considering this issue, a rather innocuous bill came across his desk, about surplus war materiel, war debt. And he said, this is foolishness. Why don't we take that debt, if you want to call it that, and turn it into funding for international exchanges? Because we need people to come to know each other. And when President Truman signed the bill, it became the Fulbright program, and there was a scholar at Oxford who once famously described it as responsible for "the greatest movement of scholars across the Earth since the fall of Constantinople in 1453." And we're extraordinarily proud of the Fulbright program and all the participants in it, going in both directions. And I'm delighted to say for your audience that the talented podcast producer that I'm talking to is in fact one of our Fulbright scholars.

[Federica]: She is. Thank you very much for saying that. And she is very honored to be. It's part of the reasons why we are here today, and that is that while I was learning more about the Fulbright program I realized how much it is about being a cultural ambassador, about face-to-face diplomacy, and not only about your research work, or teaching, or learning as a student. And that was interesting to me because in a day and age where technology allows us to communicate instantly, we can meet online in a way, we can talk to each other and even see each other, it would seem less necessary to travel. But these programs still invest, believe in investing in bringing people together and so that was something that I wanted to explore more. And that's why we are here today and I thank you very much for that. It's obvious that we are presenting these programs as a good thing, but I believe that sometimes you have been called in your career to be an advocate for these programs while competing for funding, for example, competing for limited resources, where you had to explain why these programs are not just good but maybe better than other options, other things, that are equally good things. So how do you approach defending these programs? How do you explain why they are important?

[Rick]: That's an excellent question. There are many worthy things to fund, obviously: medical research, foreign assistance, disaster assistance, lots of things. We want to make sure that we're spending the money of the American taxpayer wisely and usefully. One of the things that we like to point out about exchanges, which often doesn't occur to people when they first think about it, is that exchanges are in fact a natural outgrowth of the American character. We want to engage the world. That's who we are in our Declaration of Independence, the very first document that declared that there was going to be a United States of America. Thomas Jefferson, who wrote the document and later became our third President, wrote that we owe a decent respect to the opinions of mankind. And that's what exchanges are, a respect to the opinions of the rest of the world. Because America has a very very prominent position in the world - economically, culturally, socially, militarily, - we owe it to the world to tell everybody who we are, what our values are, why we do what we do, and let them come to know us. And that is one reason we want to tell, or share our story, and bring people here to live amongst us. And one of the key things about our exchanges, is what I like to call their secret genius, is that when someone comes here from another country, we just let them see with their own eyes, hear with their own ears, ask their own questions, make up their own minds. We don't have a message to deliver to anyone, except welcome, please see who we are and make up your own mind. It sometimes startles people when I tell them that the purpose of exchanges is not to make people like the United States or like Americans. It's to make sure they have an accurate understanding of who we are. So when you make up your mind, when anyone makes up their mind about the United States, they're doing it based on firsthand experience, not stereotypes not false information. And then if you like something or dislike something about American people, American policy, that's entirely your business. We just want to make sure it's based on facts and accuracy. Now, as it turns out, whether it's people visiting America or Americans visiting any other country, when you do bring people together on the basis of mutual respect, it almost always works out well.

[Federica]: And besides these arguments, have you ever been required to also present the impact of these programs in measurable terms? So, how do you measure impact of something that may stay with you for the rest of your life, you know. So, how do you prove, if not measure, impact?

[Rick]: We in fact are very proud to say, at the Bureau of Educational Cultural Affairs, that we had the very first full time evaluation office in the Department of State. That began about 20 years ago. We have conducted tens of thousands of interviews with our exchange participants, hundreds and hundreds of focus groups, long term independent studies. We don't analyze or evaluate ourselves. We contract with reputable private firms and universities. They do the study. So we're not self assessing. We're not judging ourself, we're letting independent outside experts do that kind of evaluation. And we're extremely pleased to say that it has tremendous lifelong impact. These programs are in fact transformational. And even though

it's not strictly a professional metric, one of the ways that people often best understand the long term impact of these programs is when we point out that more than 600 of our participants have gone on to be the Head of State or Government of their own country. And in fact while you and I are talking right now between a quarter and a third of all the world leaders are alumni of ECA programs.

[Federica]: That's huge... So, about the programs, we have mentioned that they are about people, and you said that people don't change as fast as technology does, for example, but some of these programs have been running for some decades now, and we do live in a changed the world. So, do you think that some of these programs, provided that the core values stay the same, may require some redesign? That they might be updated to match a changed world, and a changing world?

[Rick]: Yes, our programs are changing all the time, because the world is changing, and foreign policy is changing, so we change along with it. We always tried to adapt to the newest technology, even though people do change much more slowly. We try to take advantage of the speed and the comprehensiveness and the reach of new technology. Partly of course that makes it possible to reach more people more inexpensively. That's always an important consideration. But technology also helps us reach people that would be more difficult to reach through a traditional exchange. For example, we do a lot of programs with people who have various disabilities and they would simply find it much more difficult to travel or participate in a physical program, if you will. But we can reach them through technology. There are countries where, simply because of the available resources, there will be a lot of teachers, for example, we do a lot of instruction of English language teachers over the Internet or through webinars and so forth. All of those people from countries where they don't have a lot of resources of their own would not be able to travel to the United States for that kind of firsthand teaching. But they can acquire it through the blessings of technology. In some places, it's reaching out to women and girls who in more conservative societies would not be able to travel; in some countries, it's just people from what you might call the provinces. As you know, there are lots of countries, to use an American analogy, where the capital city is in New York, Washington, Los Angeles, and if you're not from the capital city, sometimes you you're an underserved part of the population, and we always want to reach out there as well. We also use technology to reach out to people who are underserved in a variety of ways: it could just be economically and socially, but it could be religious and ethnic minorities, and others, depending on the country. And again there might not be the funding for those individuals to travel to the United States, but we can reach them through technology. So we always want to explore that possibility.

[Federica]: Some changes in the world occur over long periods of time, but there are sometimes changes that are sudden and unexpected like crises, like wars, which impact the relations between certain countries. So, how do you manage these sudden changes, and unexpected

changes, that are out of your control and yet impact your programs?

[Rick]: One of the most wonderful things about exchanges, first of all, is that they are based on human nature. They're based on the reality of how people engage each other and understand each other. Another is that they're extraordinarily flexible. And whenever there is a crisis in the world, or an opportunity in the world, it's often going to be some kind of exchange that is the very first thing that two countries agreed to. For example, some of your listeners may go back as far as 'ping pong diplomacy' when China and the United States first began to re-establish diplomatic relations some decades ago. The very first public activity that the two countries engaged in was a ping pong competition. And that's because if you're talking about sports, if you're talking about art, if you're talking about music, if you're talking about youth exchange, then both countries can agree that this is a good thing. Everyone's proud of their heritage and their arts and culture. Everyone wants a better life for their young people. And the two sides can come together on this kind of neutral territory where they say good things about something that they agree on, and neither side is conceding anything politically. So, for example, I can guarantee you that when the time comes that we are prepared for all the right political reasons to have better relations with North Korea and better relations with Iran, better relations with Cuba, whatever, whichever country it might be, that among the very first things that we will do with those countries will be one of our exchange programs.

[Federica]: So, considering the changing world and this unexpected events that might bring sudden changes, how far can we think ahead when we manage, when we plan exchange programs?

[Rick]: Well, you know, we we try to think as far ahead as we can. And people who work in exchanges are always optimistic. And there are several ways to look at the future. For example, we've just been talking about a high school exchange program. Now, politicians and Secretaries of State and other Senior Officials would like to be able to say they did something, accomplish something during their time in office. You know, "while I was President, while I was Secretary, we did this." And of course that's fine. But you're not going to get that for the most part with exchanges. Exchanges require you to believe in the future. And so when our White House, our executive branch supports exchanges, when our Congress supports exchanges, they're expressing optimism, they're expressing confidence in the future. For example, I mentioned that more than 600 of our participants have gone on to be the Head of their own country. Well, there was no way to know that when we brought them. Margaret Thatcher, who later became the Prime Minister of England, came in 1967, decades before she became Prime Minister. So, what we do is, we engage people who are open minded and thoughtful and interested in learning about the world. We hope Americans going abroad are the same. And we don't take credit for the fact that Margaret Thatcher became the Prime Minister of England. What we take credit for is, understanding that here was a very dynamic, intelligent, thoughtful

woman in the British Parliament, and it would be good for her to visit the United States. And so we invited her on our International Visitor Program. Same with Fulbright. More than 80 of our participants have gone on and become Nobel laureates. And those are all Fulbrighters.

[Federica]: What do you find to be the main challenge in this business?

[Rick]: Well, there are a couple of challenges in this business, as are in any business. One of them, that people often don't think about, and that's partly because like me right now, I'm telling good stories, I'm telling the positive stories, but because we're engaging between 50 and 60 thousand people a year in both directions every year, every exchange professional knows that whatever happens to mortal men and women will eventually happen to exchange participants. Sometimes they die while they're here, they fall ill, they get married, and they fall in love, they have babies. They get robbed. Sometimes they rob someone. I mean, they're human beings. And so, everything that can happen in life sooner or later will happen to an exchange participant. So, one thing that exchange professionals have to always be ready for is to deal with that human dimension. What happens, what do you do when something goes wrong. For example, we sometimes have young people come from a country, and then while they're here in America, because they might be here for an entire year, something happens in their home countries: civil war breaks out, Ebola, a pandemic begins, and they can't go home. Sometimes the airports close, sometimes their families have been relocated. So, we have to adapt and make sure that we can accommodate them here until they're ready to go back to their home country. There's all kinds of different things that happen to human beings and we're busy with those things all the time. That's something that people often don't think about.

[Federica]: Speaking of what people think about this programs, what they know, what is less known: I would like to ask you if you, and the Bureau, if you are concerned about the reputation that these programs have in the public opinion, even if it's decision-makers who give funding. Are you concerned with the reputation that these programs have in the public eye? So, how does that type of promotion work?

[Rick]: Works out very well for exchanges, actually. I'm glad you asked that. The Department of State, because we have this unusual name, Department of State, whereas in any other country would be the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or external relations - so, it's understandable that most Americans think of the Department of State as the part of the U.S. Government that works with other countries and people around the world and not so much with the United States. But our Bureau, education and culture, is completely different, because our mandate in law is mutual understanding. Our job is to bring Americans together with people from other countries. So, we have thousands of high school exchange students in every State of the Union, high schools and homes throughout the country. We have Fulbrighters at universities all across the United States. We have all manner of different groups which travel to all parts

of the country. So, we actually have a very active vocal domestic constituency, people who will pick up the phone and call their member of Congress or go to their local district office and say “these programs are really important for us,” and they don’t say - I mean, I can go up to the Hill and say “you know, these programs are important for American foreign policy, these programs are important for international leadership,” but all of these men and women around the United States, they go to their member of Congress and say “these programs are important for our town, our community, our children, our school,” because they see the benefit of having this kind of international engagement, which can also lead to long term exchanges, that can lead to trade and business and other kinds of activities built on that as well. But we are privileged to have a lot of support from the American people for these programs.

[Federica]: Speaking of people, and stories of people, I’m sure that in your career you have collected beautiful stories from other people and maybe you have some of your own. Would you like to share one with us?

[Rick]: I would be delighted. My very first travel abroad with the United States government was in 1975. I went to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, which was then of course part of the Soviet Union. It was the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. I was working on a traveling U.S. Government exhibit about life in the United States. And like any exhibit, I would be standing in one of the displays in the exhibit. The Soviet visitors, because they were Uzbeks and Russians, it was the Soviet Union, would come in and ask whatever question they wanted to about the United States. That was fine. We were there for about three months in 1975. Last fall, forty three years later, I went back to Tashkent. I went to the University of World Languages to meet with the Rector there. And we were sitting at the usual long table, and I was there with the public affairs officer from the Embassy. The Rector of the University, he was there with the Head of the English Language Department and a couple of professors. And the Uzbeks being wonderfully hospitable people said, “So, is this your first visit here? How do you like it?” I said, “Well, actually I was here forty three years ago,” and at that point a professor at the end of the table said: “I know you.” He said, “You were on the exhibit in 1975.” He said, “you were on the very first stand on the exhibit,” which I was; he said, “I remember talking to you. And then a couple of weeks later, I saw you in the old bazaar in Tashkent and I stopped you and asked if you wouldn’t mind having a conversation and we talked. And that’s why I remember you. You’re the first American I ever met and ever spoke to.” And I apologize for telling you a story that’s about me. But it shows how lasting, how enduring, how powerful these programs are. Whoever does them, these programs have a transformational effect on people. And one of the reasons that we’ve always been fortunate to have a lot of support from the American people and the American Congress is because they know, that they understand that when we conduct exchanges it’s our country putting its best foot forward, with our values and the better angels of our nature.

[Federica]: Well, precious insight in this interesting topic. I would like to thank you very much for being on Technoculture.

[Rick]: You're very welcome. It was my pleasure.

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