



The Importance of Alumni in Building International Understanding

By

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Patricia Harrison spoke to alumni from throughout the Asia Pacific region, including the United States, during an East-West Center 1960s Alumni Reunion in Honolulu, Hawai'i. The theme of the conference was "Making a Difference: Pioneers in Interchange between East and West."

The East-West Center provides a forum for extended discussion of major issues affecting Asia, the Pacific and the United States by prominent researchers, analysts and policymakers. This publication series extends these presentations to a wider audience.

As we look at our world today, it's clear that more than ever, it is important for people of good will, alumni of all of our exchange programs worldwide, to utilize accumulated wisdom and experience to increase mutual understanding, mutual respect between people of different countries, different ethnicities, and different faiths on a global level.

I cannot think of one group more positioned to do just that than the alumni of exchange programs — alumni of the East-West Center — because alumni represent the committed core, the leadership base, that knows how to connect to others, knows how to share what they know and who they are to benefit others.

Leadership begins within the person. It can be a dramatic moment when you decide — "I cannot stand by and do nothing" — or it can be a quiet contribution day by day until you look back over four decades and realize that over time you did make a difference ... that you are making a difference.

The role of the East-West Center is critical to making this positive difference. And as each of its alumni has benefited from the work and mission of the Center — they have been well positioned to show the way for others.

As President of the East-West Center, Charles Morrison's dedication and leadership and his vision for a dynamic alumni association has made a difference in terms of what the Center has achieved.

This is particularly true, for instance, with programs that serve younger men and women participating in the South Pacific Islands Scholarship Program, funded by my bureau, Educational and Cultural Affairs.

Reaching younger, and wider populations beyond our traditional elite has been my mission since I was sworn in right after September 11, 2001, by Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Right after that terrible time, it was clear that people of good will were looking for ways to connect with one another to make a difference.

First Lady Laura Bush said it so well: "Everywhere I go, people tell me they are reassessing their lives. They are considering public service because they want to make a difference in their communities."

The call for leadership, which is really a call to service, is being heard.

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell said, "As we work together to end the scourge of terrorism, let us also work to create partnerships for peace, prosperity, and democracy." Like you, I felt it important that we move to engage, inspire, inform, and connect with young people — especially those who are facing what Queen Rania of Jordan calls the "hope gap."

The "hope gap" is between those who have hope for the future because someone took an interest in them and those who have no hope and no future and thus, are susceptible to the siren song of extremists.

Two years ago, with my team at the Bureau for Educational and Cultural Affairs at the State Department, and with the cooperation from ministers of education from many countries, we created a new initiative called Partnerships for Learning.

This is a global educational program based on the premise that people of good will everywhere want only the best for their children and the best begins with a real education, a chance to see beyond the limits imposed by others — a chance for a young person to understand where he or she can make a contribution.

I am happy to report that two years later our first Partnerships for Learning (P4L) program at the high school level was launched in September 2003 with 130 young people from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, the Philippines, just to name a few.

Through "P4L," we have expanded Fulbright and professional and youth exchanges. We have developed English teaching initiatives and teacher training programs and supported conflict resolution exchanges, and Islamic studies by American

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scholars. We have also strengthened efforts to enhance the learning of critical languages in U.S. colleges and high schools, using exchange participants to build deeper understanding and respect among people and countries.

I was in Iraq in October with Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Tom Farrell, and we met with the presidents of all the universities in Baghdad.

The first thing on their wish list was for us to work together to make it possible for their young people to reconnect to higher education, to restart the Fulbright Program, to begin the exchange process.

As one of the presidents said: “We cannot have a culture of prosperity, if we do not have a culture of real learning.”

Real learning — among other critical needs, is what the Iraqis were deprived of during the Saddam Hussein Reign of Terror. Connection to learning in the fields of medicine and history and science and real education was severed and distorted.

So now young Iraqi men and women are eager to connect to the learning they have missed. They are eager to become alumni of the programs such as the ones offered by the East-West Center, or Fulbright, or the State Department’s International Visitor Programs.

As alumni they will be ready to help other Iraqis, to train other teachers, to be part of the renewal of their country.

President Bush said, “The relationships that are formed between individuals from different countries as part of international programs and exchanges foster good will that develops into vibrant, mutually beneficial partnerships among nations.”

Last year our exchange programs enabled 35,000 exchanges and all of them at a minimum share their experiences with family, friends, and colleagues. This is where the power, the power of alumni lies.

We estimate that over time, they, as well as former alumni, will touch the lives of over seven million people.

We now have over 700,000 alumni of our exchange programs and many are household names.

Hamid Karzai, President of Afghanistan; Megawati Sukarnoputri, President of Indonesia; Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations; Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair, Anwar Sadat, and many more who have achieved as leaders in business, government, the community.

But by far, the majority of alumni continue to make their contribution in a quiet way, constantly building. It is a sustainable contribution that causes a positive ripple effect because as you volunteer and contribute, you teach others how to volunteer and contribute as well.

Each of you answered the call to service through good headline times and bad, working always for peace and prosperity and democracy.

Right after September 11, 2001, we heard from a young man from Syria — A Fulbrighter who was at the time studying at the University of Arizona.

The press interviewed him and I will never forget what he said. “People who come to the United States to study, like myself, are the link between the United States and our people. And in the end, international educational exchange is the ultimate solution to global terrorism.”

Let me repeat that: International educational exchange is the ultimate solution to global terrorism.

Right before the war in Iraq, my bureau hosted a group of Iraqi journalists from Northern Iraq, Kurds who traveled throughout the United States as part of our International Visitor Program — they wanted to update their training and journalism skills.

After three weeks they returned to Washington, D.C. and I asked them about their impressions. One of the men said to me, “I found out Americans don’t care.”

This is not what I wanted to hear.

The look on my face caused him to say, “Oh no, you don’t understand.”

“We were told that Americans hate the Kurds. We found out you don’t hate us, you don’t even know who we are. And you don’t care. You don’t care how we worship, how we pray. It was not a problem. I want this kind of ‘not caring’ for my country.”

In my role as Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs, I have the great honor of meeting the people who come to our country on these exchange programs.

People like the Afghan women teachers who taught young girls despite torture and threats from the Taliban.

“How did you find the courage to do this?” I asked.

“It wasn’t courage, one woman told me. It was just the right thing to do.”

Well, that is not only courage, it is leadership, knowing the right thing to do and doing it.

These women are studying at the University of Nebraska, learning English and computer skills

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that they will share with their students and other teachers in Afghanistan as part of a 500 teacher training program over the next two years.

Through Fulbright scholarships and Educational and Cultural Affairs support, we are building on ties created between Temple University in Philadelphia and Gadjah Mada, University of Jogjakarta, to change the way religion is studied, taught, and learned in Indonesia. The project included a very successful course taught by an American professor from Temple University on the foundations of Judaism.

It was the first time the students in Indonesia had ever met, much less been taught by someone of the Jewish faith. The Indonesian Minister of Education referred to the project as an island of excellence.

While our efforts to reach countries and regions with significant Muslim populations have taken on critical importance in the past two years, we are continuing our strong support for academic and professional exchanges between the U.S. and all parts of Asia.

We just celebrated fifty years of remarkable Fulbright programs with Japan, and our much younger Fulbright program with Vietnam is celebrating its tenth year. The Chinese government is eager to expand Fulbright and our program with India is contributing to deeper understanding between the U.S. and the world's largest democracy.

In addition, the East-West Center manages, on the State Department's behalf, two important scholarship programs for university students from the Pacific Islands and from the new nation of East Timor.

These programs provide study opportunities to talented students and also demonstrate U.S. commitment to engagement with these regions as highlighted by President Bush's meeting with Pacific Island leaders and with Governor of Hawai'i, Linda Lingle, organized by the East-West Center, on October 23rd.

Yesterday, I had a chance to welcome over 300 elementary school children and teachers at the East-West Center to kick off Hawai'i's celebration of International Education Week. I was looking into the faces of our future leaders and, right now, at their age, the faces are hopeful, happy, and positive about their world and their role in that world.

The East-West Center, and all of us, must do all we can to ensure that those children get their chance, so that they are prepared to meet opportunity.

I am excited about the direction that the East-West Center is taking and I know that we in

the State Department look forward to a continued strong and productive working relationship.

And that relationship includes the alumni of the Center. With the experience gained, East-West Center alumni serve as opinion leaders, activists and contributors. Alumni efforts are making a positive difference in the daily lives of so many.

In closing, I have a few observations for East-West Center alumni —

- Now is the time of either great despair or great opportunity. I think I can say with assurance that each of us is doing the work we do because we have chosen to see this as a time of great opportunity and to dedicate ourselves to helping others.
- East-West Center alumni are distinct and different from one another. Yet they share the timeless qualities demonstrated by leaders worldwide, men and women.
- Center alumni possess a strong need to achieve that is coupled with an equally strong need to contribute. They have curiosity, are risk takers and have an open approach to cultural differences.
- EWC alumni are willing to share the benefits of their experience with others. Without that sharing component, there would be no multiplier effect.
- What alumni do now and in the years to come is critical to our communities, our countries and our world, and I know all East-West Center alumni will continue to be agents for positive change.

Secretary of State Colin Powell believes that optimism is a force multiplier and according to the experts, optimists believe that what they do can make a big difference — that what they do matters.

So optimistically and with gratitude and appreciation to East-West Center alumni for their long-term commitment to promoting mutual understanding and better relations between Americans and the peoples of Asia and the Pacific, let me thank each of you and Dr. Morrison and the East-West Center for our partnership in this shared mission.

Patricia de Stacy Harrison was sworn in as the Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs on October 2, 2001. As an entrepreneur, author and political leader, Ms. Harrison has over 20 years experience in communication strategy, coalition, and constituency building. Throughout her career she has worked effectively to provide "a seat at the table" to women and minorities in business and politics.



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The East-West Center is an education and research organization established by the U.S. Congress in 1960 to strengthen relations and understanding among the nations of Asia, the Pacific, and the United States. The Center promotes the development of a stable, prosperous, and peaceful Asia Pacific community through cooperative study, training, and research. Funding for the Center comes from the U.S. government, with additional support provided by private agencies, individuals, corporations, and Asian and Pacific governments.