

Making History Can Be Risky Business: Traveling to ‘Challenging’ Countries in Pursuit of Academic Diplomacy

Clare Overmann

Head, Higher Education Initiatives, Institute of International Education, Washington, DC, USA
Email: covermann@iie.org

Tags

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Setting

As part of its mission, DiploCorps, a U.S.-based non-profit organization will sometimes choose to lead partnership-focused delegations to countries and nations where the United States may not have full diplomatic relations, or where relations are just starting to open. Some of these countries may be on the State Sponsors of Terrorism list, have embargoes or other trade sanctions, have restricted visa policies, or limited means for U.S. individuals to travel to the country. As a private entity, this organization has the flexibility to lead these types of delegations in pursuit of academic diplomacy and higher education partnerships. Arranging such a delegation requires working with the relevant government authorities, spending money in the local economy through hotels, transportation, and other in-country costs, and interacting with university representatives who are often government employees. U.S. institutions that decide to join do so with the knowledge of increased challenges.

Case

DiploCorps Director, Maggie, was one of many who read the news that the U.S. had recently lifted sanctions on Country X, making it possible for Americans to travel to Country X after several decades. Given this historic news, Maggie raised the question internally as to whether they should consider organizing a delegation, as they have done with other similar countries. Leadership agreed that this would probably be the right time to do so, but asked Maggie to consider the feasibility and rationale.

Maggie thought about it. She knew from other similar programs that this would dominate much of her and other staff's time over the next year, requiring many nuanced communications, back-and-forth with a large number of stakeholders, and careful planning. From past experience, she knew that it would be likely that visas would take a long time to obtain (and might not even come through by the departure date), that financial transactions might prove challenging (possibly requiring individuals to bring large amounts of cash with them), and that DiploCorps might not ultimately have much say over the itinerary, lodging, or other in-country arrangements. Moreover, she knew staff time and travel expenses would be significant for such a complex endeavor, a cost that would possibly be unrecoverable despite charging U.S. higher education participants a small fee.

Despite the known challenges – and understanding the inevitability of many unknown ones, too – Maggie ultimately confirmed to DiploCorps leadership that the potential to do something important and historic that advances their mission was worth the extra work. A call went out to U.S. higher education institutions to join the DiploCorps delegation, and Maggie and team set about coordinating the trip. The inevitable challenges did in fact come to pass: DiploCorps had to apply for special permission to travel to Country X, requiring U.S. Embassy involvement and Country X Ministry approval; the Country X Embassy in Washington, DC required passports to be sent in for lengthy periods of time; banks in Country X could not accept wire transfers; and Maggie and team did not have a final itinerary until arriving in country, prompting many anxious inquiries from the U.S. participants. Many unexpected, new challenges also came to pass which required extra attention, navigation, and problem solving.

Once in Country X, everyone on the delegation agreed that this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience and the start of a new page for the U.S.'s relationship with Country X. U.S. participants were shuttled around in government vehicles and experienced much fanfare at each of their visits. They were guided the entire time by kind, knowledgeable government representatives who quickly became a comfortable part of the delegation. The delegation stayed mainly in the capital with one or two cultural excursions to the country's famous sites. The delegates were impressed with the university facilities they visited, the level of research they learned about, and the multi-culturalism they witnessed in society. Most meetings were primarily ceremonial in nature, but there were discussions about future collaboration and, by the end of the trip, there was a genuine sense of possibility. Several institutions even signed (non-binding) letters of intent to demonstrate their willingness to pursue partnerships.

Four months after the delegation, Country X became embroiled in a political standoff with the rest of the world, having voted in a new government well known to be tolerating human rights violations and corruption. Negative news stories started emerging about Country X and, although the sanctions remained lifted, the nation started to fall out of the limelight. The U.S. institutions on the delegation remained hopeful, but cautious about future collaborations.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Did DiploCorps make the right decision to pursue the delegation to Country X?
- What decision-making strategies might have been useful in determining whether to move forward with the trip?
- Are there intercultural competencies that would have been useful to employ throughout this scenario? What are some of the biases we may knowingly or unknowingly bring when we work in any country?
- What were some of the risks that were taken in this scenario? Were they calculated risks? Were there ways to mitigate risk?
- Are delegations such as in this scenario worthwhile pursuits for NGOs? For higher education institutions?
- Should DiploCorps and/or the delegates maintain contact with Country X and continue to try to forge partnerships? What are factors that would challenge the decision to continue working with Country X?