



Outcome Assessment of the Institute for Representative Government (IRG) Program

Executive Summary

June 2003

Purpose of the Outcome Assessment

In September 2001, the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), Office of Policy and Evaluation contracted with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to conduct an outcome assessment of the Institute for Representative Government (IRG) exchange program. This outcome assessment documents and reports on the overall results of the program and assesses the degree to which the program has reached its legislative and program goals.

Overall Assessment of the Program

The IRG program has successfully promoted greater understanding of the U.S. Congress, the U.S. state legislatures, and the U.S. political system of representative democracy. Moreover, the program has effectively contributed to increased understanding between the people of the United States and people of participating countries. These conclusions are supported by the following study results.

As a direct result of the IRG program experience, respondents reported an *increased understanding* of:

- U.S. democracy and democratic principles – 80%
- the diversity of opinions in the United States – 74%
- the U.S. government and the U.S. Congressional structure – 73%
- the United States – 71%
- U.S. domestic policies and the United States' bilateral relationship with their country – 63%
- U.S. foreign policy – 61%

- 97% of alumni reported that the IRG program experience was at least somewhat valuable for their professional development and career growth.
- Alumni reported sharing what they learned about the United States and its government and people with professional colleagues (97%), family and friends (90%), and their community (85%).
- Alumni successfully legislated or enacted policies at the *national* level (39%) and at the *regional or local* level (18%) that were partly influenced by what they learned in the IRG program.
- Alumni who established contacts with members of their IRG delegation (83%) and with people in the United States (76%) indicated that these contacts helped them to reinforce or sustain democratic practices in their country.

This evaluation also assessed the degree to which the IRG exchange program has reached the overarching legislative goals of the Fulbright-Hays Act. This Act enables the U.S. Government to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and people of other countries by means of educational and cultural exchange. The goals of the Fulbright-Hays Act are to:

- Increase mutual understanding between people of the United States and people of other countries.
- Strengthen the ties that unite people of the United States with other nations.
- Promote international cooperation for education and cultural advancement.
- Assist in the development of “friendly, sympathetic and peaceful relations between the United States and the other countries of the world.”

Project Information

From September 2001 to April 2003, AIR conducted the *Outcome Assessment of the Institute for Representative Government (IRG) Program*. It was decided at the outset that the study would encompass all program years up to 2001, but be limited to seven countries. The seven countries were identified by ECA in consultation with the U.S. Department of State Regional Bureaus and included: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Jordan, Mexico, Turkey, and Uruguay. In-depth interviews with alumni and U.S. Embassy staff were also conducted in Argentina and Turkey.

AIR's evaluation design combined quantitative and qualitative methods to gather data. A survey was administered to the entire population of 1988–2001 IRG program alumni (n=208) in the seven study countries, and resulted in a 52 percent response rate. AIR also conducted in-person interviews with program administrators from ECA's Office of Citizen Exchanges, and telephone interviews with a sample of 12 IRG alumni in Argentina and Turkey, the IRG Program Director in Washington, D.C., 11 Foreign Service Officers and Foreign Service Nationals at the U.S. Embassy in the seven study countries, and eight participating U.S. government or political officials and/or staffers who meet with IRG delegations in Washington, D.C. Stéphane Baldi was the Project Director at AIR. He was assisted by a team of researchers consisting of Kevin Carter, Andrew Donlan, and Taylor Dimsdale, along with research coordinators located in each of the seven study countries.

Information on the IRG Program

The Institute for Representative Government (the Institute), founded in 1988, is an independent, bipartisan non-profit organization responsible for conducting the IRG program. The IRG program provides foreign legislators and parliamentarians from developing or newly established democracies with a better understanding of the U.S. Congress and the U.S. political system of representative democracy. The program is comprised of an intensive two-week professional exchange in the United States for delegations of foreign parliamentarians, and, occasionally, other military and government officials. The delegations meet with Members of Congress and state legislatures and their staffs, officials in government agencies at the federal, state, and local levels, and occasionally with non-governmental organizations. Typically, delegations spend the first week of their program in Washington, D.C., and the second week in one or two other locations in the United States. Since its inception, the IRG program has involved more than 50 exchange projects (IRG delegations) and brought to the United States over 520 foreign parliamentarians, and government and military officials, from 30 countries. The Institute conducts three to four projects annually in the United States, and each project involves a delegation of approximately 10 foreign participants.

Summary of Findings

AIR, in coordination with ECA's Office of Policy and Evaluation, identified 15 program outcomes and prepared research questions that provided the foundation for the study. The program outcomes and research questions were grouped into six major themes addressing the key goals of the IRG program:

- Increased understanding of the U.S. Congress, U.S. state legislatures, and the U.S. political system of representative democracy
- Enhanced mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries
- Increased understanding of U.S. foreign policy and U.S. national interests
- Increased democratic orientations and legislation in the alumni's home country

- Establishment of professional, institutional, and personal contacts with both individuals from the United States and individuals from the home country
- Sharing of program information in the alumni's home country

These themes relate to various changes experienced by IRG program alumni as a result of the exchange experience, including: 1) changes in understanding and attitudes; 2) changes in behavior and condition; and 3) changes in organization and societal impact. The key study findings are presented according to these three types of changes experienced by IRG program alumni.

Changes in Understanding and Attitudes

“I come from an anti-American political background. The IRG program positively influenced my views about the United States. My preconceived ideas were eliminated; my tolerance increased. My perspective about the United States changed.”

“[The program helped me] to better understand the administrative and political structure of the United States. I saw the positive effects of the United States on the world and the importance of the U.S. role in foreign policy.”

The following results reflect the percentage of IRG program alumni that reported a 4 or 5 on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a great extent). As a direct result of the IRG program experience, alumni respondents reported an *increased understanding* of the following aspects of the United States.

- U.S. democracy and democratic principles – 80%
- Diversity of opinions in the United States – 74%
- U.S. government and the U.S. Congressional structure – 73%
- The United States in general – 71%
- U.S. lawmaking process – 69%
- U.S. Constitutional structure – 66%
- International issues in general – 64%
- U.S. domestic policies – 63%
- The United States' bilateral relationship with their country – 63%
- U.S. foreign policy – 61%

The following results reflect the percentage of IRG program alumni that reported a 4 or 5 on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a great extent). Alumni respondents reported that their *IRG program experience helped*:

- provide them with a more informed and broader perspective of the United States – 82%
- them to develop a greater appreciation of alternative opinions and political processes – 60%
- promote mutual understanding and mutual respect among people of the world – 53%
- Alumni agreed that the IRG program helped at least somewhat to increase their understanding of U.S. political issues (63%) and U.S. social and cultural issues (65%).

- Alumni reported increases in their knowledge of various U.S. political institutions after participation in the program. For instance, on a scale of 1 (no knowledge) to 5 (expertise), 74% of alumni rated their knowledge of the U.S. Legislative Branch *immediately after* the program as a 4 or 5, but only 9% of alumni gave this rating of their knowledge *before* participation in the program.

The following results reflect some aspects of the United States that were addressed at least to some extent during the program and the corresponding percentage of alumni that reported the topic being addressed.

- The U.S. Congress – 98%
- The U.S. political system of representative democracy – 96%
- Democracy – 74%
- U.S. state legislatures – 69%

Changes in Behavior and Condition

“There is a little side effect that is very interesting, I’ve found.... The parliamentarians who go on the trip together and come back, you know, they improve their own relationships, [that is, the relationships] between parties and between persons.”

- 97% of IRG program alumni reported that the IRG program experience was at least somewhat valuable for their professional development and career growth.
- 82% reported establishing one or more contacts with other delegates while in the IRG program, with 37% reported establishing seven or more contacts.
- 79% reported making seven or more contacts with individuals from the United States during their participation in the program, although these contacts are generally not sustained over time.
- 69% reported that at least three of the contacts they established with individuals from their delegation during the IRG program still exist today.
- Alumni reported that the IRG program helped them at least to some extent develop an interest in professional collaborations with people they met in the United States (58%) and with other members of their IRG delegation (76%).
- Alumni indicated they shared what they learned about the United States and its government and people with professional colleagues (97%), family and friends (90%), and their community (85%).
- 66% of alumni indicated that they also shared what they learned in the IRG program with other groups or individuals, including members of the armed forces, university students, and fellow party members.

Some types of information shared by IRG alumni includes:

- The U.S. Congress – 91%
- The U.S. political system of representative democracy – 89%
- U.S. society in general – 85%
- People in the United States – 81%
- U.S. culture – 73%

The following demonstrates some key findings related to the employment mobility of the IRG alumni between the time they participated in the IRG program and the time they completed the study survey in 2002.

- Among the 51 alumni who indicated being in an elected political office at the national level during the IRG program, 25 reported being in the same position in 2002.
- Nine of the 51 alumni holding an elected national political office at the time of the IRG program were in a non-political office in a private organization in 2002.
- Of the 22 alumni occupying a non-political office in the public sector at the time of their participation, more than half (13) remained in the same type of position in 2002.
- The job category “non-political office in private organization” had the greatest influx during the interim between program participation and survey administration, indicating that many IRG program alumni no longer serve in an elected political capacity.

Changes in Organization and Societal Impact

“One of the aspects that impressed me the most was the ROTC program we saw at the University of Colorado. We tried to implement this [in Argentina].”

“[I worked on] constitutional changes regarding basic rights and freedoms, and political rights...and [revisions] made to articles of the Turkish Criminal Code which impeded freedom of thought.”

Of those contacts that remain with *individuals from the United States*, IRG alumni reported that these contacts have evolved since their program participation and have helped them to:

- inform their colleagues and community about the United States’ system of democracy – 77%
- reinforce or sustain democratic practices in their country – 76%
- learn more about some useful practices from the United States – 75%
- make decisions in their current job – 69%
- initiate or develop democratic practices in their country – 65%
- advance their career – 61%
- open or sustain a political dialogue with the United States – 60%

Of those contacts that remain with *members from their IRG delegation*, IRG alumni reported that these contacts have evolved since their program participation and have helped them to:

- reinforce or sustain democratic practices in their country – 83%
- initiate or develop democratic practices in their country – 70%
- open a political dialogue with other parties – 69%

- 69% also indicated that delegation contacts had grown and led to further contacts within their country or abroad.

- 69% indicated that their sharing of information about the United States reinforced democratic practices in their country at least to some extent.

- 39% of all alumni said they successfully legislated or enacted policies at the *national level* that were partly influenced by what they learned in the program.

- 18% of all alumni said they successfully legislated or enacted policies at the *regional or local level* that was partly influenced by what they learned in the program.

“Our country experienced at the time a very difficult situation. The military forces were questioned by the government as to whether they were following democratic practices or not. I tried from my position to establish a relationship and more effective communication between the military forces and the government, applying the knowledge we gained during the program.”

Conclusions

The IRG program effectively promotes greater understanding of the U.S. Congress, U.S. state legislatures, and the U.S. political system of representative democracy. Overall, alumni indicated that their knowledge of the U.S. political system increased as a result of the program and this increase was sustained over time. Alumni indicated that the program enhanced their understanding of topics relevant to U.S. foreign policy and national interests.

The program also successfully promoted mutual understanding and respect and closer relations between the United States and the alumni’s home country. Many alumni reported that their visit was crucial in helping them transcend false stereotypes and sensationalized portrayals of Americans and life in the United States as depicted in the media and in films. Some alumni reported being surprised by aspects of American culture, for example, the diversity, tolerance, and spirit of openness in the United States; different ways of life; and the professional work ethic.

Although a majority of alumni established professional contacts with individuals from the United States during the IRG program, typically these contacts were not sustained over time. However, in a few instances the personal and professional connections that endured helped alumni in efforts to institute democratic practices in their home country. More than half of all alumni surveyed also reported establishing contacts with other members of their delegation. Some alumni indicated that the program facilitated interaction among delegation members from rival political parties or factions within their home country. Among alumni who reported having established contacts with other members of their

delegation, a majority reported that the contacts still exist today and have helped them reinforce and sustain democratic practices in their country.

IRG program alumni have shared what they learned about the United States with colleagues, friends and family, and their community at home. This sharing of information helps facilitate the goal of increased mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries. A number of alumni reported successfully legislating or enacting policies at the national, regional, or local level that were partly influenced by what they learned in the program. Almost all alumni reported that the IRG experience was at least somewhat valuable for their professional development and career growth. Some alumni indicated that the program enabled them to be more knowledgeable in their positions.

The IRG program's impact on participants is clear despite limited resources. Moreover, although the program is brief—bringing foreign delegations to the United States for only a two-week period—results from this evaluation suggest that the IRG program has a meaningful effect on participants and contributes to increased understanding between the people of the United States and people of participating countries.

As two IRG alumni concluded:

“The mutual understanding between the United States and Argentina is extremely important. There should be more programs like this because meeting the people and seeing the country firsthand makes a greater impact on the visitors than going to conferences about the United States in Argentina. I appreciated very much seeing the country coast to coast and meeting the people on the street.”

“This was a great experience, not only for me but also for other participants who went on subsequent [IRG] programs. I think it is crucial [for] continuity in communication and understanding of the United States. I think that, if possible, this kind of program should continue.”

Highlights of IRG Alumni Feedback

“I consider everything I learned in the IRG program to be fundamental to my political formation.”

“In the past, I heard conflicting information about the United States. In my case, this program provided contact with the reality of the situation, which produced a deep change in my knowledge and appreciation of the country.”

“The program allowed me to learn, in very detailed form, how the structures of the government of the United States function, [about] legislative powers, federal government, state governments, the [role] of universities, public life, the relationship between the government and the armed forces, and, above all, the society.”

“The trip to the United States was very beneficial; the contacts I made with North American politicians have...served me well, and I consider that to be an incredible opportunity.”

“Our previous knowledge about the United States, before the program, consisted only of what we had read, what we had heard. But, when we went there, in the face of some of the information given to us...we personally experienced some of the facts. It was very helpful. Our ideas, maybe some wrong conceptions, were eliminated this way. I can say that I personally benefited a lot.”

“I think [the IRG program] helps spread the concept of democratization. Insofar as I’ve been involved, it’s helped define what democracy is, and in a grassroots kind of hands-on way how a government would go about addressing what to me is one of the principal features of a democracy, namely, that a government should serve rather than master the people.”

“People in [my] part of the world are very much against U.S. foreign policy, so everything that can help people go to the [United States] and see why things are done [as they are] is very helpful.”

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