

Now is the Time for Fearless Global Citizens

Reassuring Youthful Travelers to Advance Peace and Understanding

By William L. Gertz, President & CEO, American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS)

Paris, Brussels, Nice, Manchester, London—all admired international cities that are now known for terrorist incidents, each with heartbreaking casualties, examples of heroism, and a hashtag.

Concern for victims and loved ones is, of course, a natural and appropriate response. But terrorism also generates existential fear, including worry about global travel at a time when the U.S. government is trying to institute a “travel ban” on certain countries.

Despite these fears, those of us involved with sending American students abroad and/or bringing international students to the U.S. continue to plan exciting programs and engage in meaningful dialogue about the value of international education, even as we spend more of our time addressing safety and security concerns.

In short, there is simply no turning back for those of us who are dedicated to this work. We still strongly believe in the long-term value of international education and the importance of dialogue and global understanding. Face to face.

We are realists about the grave challenges in our world, but we remain idealists in search of our common goal, which is, ultimately, a more peaceful world.

In response to these challenges, we have decided to create a non-partisan, non-commercial initiative to change the negative conversation and provocative partisan bickering into a positive movement. To this end, my organization, AIFS, has developed a campaign that we call Fearless Global Citizen.

Fearless Global Citizen is an international campaign designed to motivate youth to travel without fear, created in direct response to recent world events. The intent is to combat



negativity and highlight the importance of cultural understanding. The mission is to bring the world together through international exchange and global travel.

Despite the worries and challenges today, young people must continue to pursue meaningful life experiences, understand people of all stripes, and learn to navigate in a complex world. And the journey to world peace can only be forged through true international awareness—attained by expanding our knowledge and understanding of other countries and cultures.

Fearlessly Embracing our World

Who are fearless global citizens? We are individuals who are enthusiastic about:

- **Stepping outside our comfort zones.** Curiously leaving behind the familiar, unafraid to travel to learn more about ourselves and the world.
- **Experiencing various cultures firsthand.** Knowing there's no substitute for learning about people and cultures through travel.

- **Exploring the world to enhance our careers.** Gaining international perspectives, insights, and ideas to forge mutually beneficial business relationships and transactions.
- **Gaining appreciation of the world around us.** Building respect for our fellow global citizens by understanding their lives, cultures, and values, resulting in genuine appreciation and lasting friendships.
- **Embracing diversity.** Accepting that diversity comes in many forms—religion, race, culture, national origin, and gender—and that acceptance and understanding are essential to learning and the prospects for peace.

The Fearless Global Citizen campaign will spotlight individuals from around the world who've embraced the spirit of international exploration. These profiles will be posted on the website www.fearlessglobalcitizen.org. Through the site, people can share their thoughts and experiences, as well as highlight how being a global citizen is vital to a peaceful and diverse world.

If I could say anything to a young person struggling with the decision to travel, it would be this: You're living at an exciting time—it's your time to travel, learn about other cultures, and have experiences and relationships that will shape the rest of your life. Don't let the moment pass you by.

Barrier-breaking Conversations at the Dinner Table

If we think about it, what's really at the heart of these opportunities for peace and understanding is something quite simple—the chance to have a meaningful conversation.

We know that student exchanges and travel opportunities are incredible gifts that change perceptions and build cross-cultural relationships and lifelong friendships. Simply connecting with young, energetic, and intelligent people at the dinner table goes a long way to break down media-generated stereotypes, whether it's the "ugly American" or biases about people from places like Mexico, Iraq, or China.

Students from Europe or Asia who are exposed to Americans, for example, get to see a side of the U.S. that's not always understood from the nightly news and the global media. Their image of the U.S. is often about bombs and guns, or they think Americans are just focused on money and work. So, it makes a difference when they get to see a different side, people who are kind, caring, and generous.

When then Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping came to the U.S. in 2012 on an agricultural mission, he insisted on visiting his host family from 27 years earlier. He wanted to reconnect with the Iowa farmers and other residents he came to know then. Today, he's the

president of China, one of the most powerful people in the world.

With that exchange program, Xi Jinping gained an understanding of America and Americans that he wouldn't otherwise have. And, he is one of some 300 current or former heads of state who have participated in exchange programs to America. With today's tense international climate, this kind of experience is incredibly important for future cooperation and peace.

Ultimately, said one American host recently, "Perceptions change because we start to care about each other. Our guests go back home with a little piece of my heart, and I have a piece of theirs."

"We need these programs now more than ever as a counterbalance to the negativity we see, and to build social activism," said Janine Magidman, a veteran teacher at Seattle's Roosevelt High School, who coordinates homestays for exchange programs. "The key to peace is citizen diplomacy. Nothing works better than sitting around the kitchen table telling stories."

Addressing a practical need for cultural competence

These days, whether students need to develop technical skills, as opposed to broader intercultural competencies and cross-cultural skills, is not an either-or proposition. Business leaders are concerned about whether academic institutions acting alone can adequately prepare students for dynamic changes taking place in the global workforce.

According to Laurette Bennhold-Samaan, managing director at Aperian Global, an intercultural consulting, training, and web tools company, "In today's global economy, where complexity and change are the norm, attracting and retaining culturally competent talent will continue to be a challenge for companies. International experience has become a critical asset for all global organizations and will continue to create a competitive advantage—both for the individuals and for the companies that hire them."

In fact, according to the biggest survey on the subject, the QS Global Employer Survey Report, six out of 10 employers around the world say they



"value an international study experience and the attributes that the experience may confer to mobile students." More than 80 percent said they actively sought graduates who had studied abroad. These are the views of more than 10,000 employers in 116 countries on five continents.

It comes down to this: Going without your support network, building trust and problem-solving skills in new environments, adapting to different practices that increase your resourcefulness, and experiencing a different culture make you more interesting and skillful.

"The work of NGOs, such as the AIFS Foundation, to provide high-quality international education programs for both American students and international students is key to exposing as many youth as possible to universal values and new perspectives, as well as encouraging long-term international interests and engagement," says Adam Erel, former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs.

"As a result of participating in exchange programs," Mr. Erel adds, "students commonly express a desire to continue learning about the world at large with a new appreciation for the complexity of society, including their own."

"Life Begins at the End of Your Comfort Zone."

This quote by American author Neale Donald Walsch kind of says it all. When you travel fearlessly, you open up the world. You have a chance to connect with yourself and others. You may not conquer every fear, but you will gain confidence and perspective to fear less and live more. And don't forget, the odds of being a victim are infinitesimal.

"I would encourage traveling at any age, but the earlier you can learn the





lessons travel teaches the better," said Hannah Peterson, a young woman whose blog post appeared on greenhearttravel.com. "In high school and college you have the luxury of having flexibility since you can study anywhere in the world and have relatively long study breaks. It is a prime time to take advantage of your freedom and youth.

"It can be scary," she continued, "but once you figure out that you can connect with people despite differences, and you can navigate foreign environments, you become a smarter, more competent individual. Embrace the discomfort. Search for it, because it is helping you grow. You realize that you CAN do things despite the obstacles, and suddenly the obstacles seem less obstructive and more like welcomed challenges."

She says, "Use the confidence and cultural sensitivity that traveling helps you develop and help it make you successful." And she notes, "Making friendships abroad can make this big world seem a little smaller and help you feel more connected wherever you go. The best advice I can give is to meet as many people on your travels as you can."

Pilar Guzmán, writing for *Condé Nast Traveler*, explained, "The rationale for continuing to visit places like Istanbul, Paris, Bali, or Cairo extends far beyond numbers, and even beyond the popular idea that not going means 'they' (the terrorists) will have won. Rather, the real reason to go is that if we don't, we give in to our own primal fears, the very ones that, when fed by anger, poverty, disenfranchisement, and isolation, literally and figuratively explode. It's fear that drives us to retreat to an us-versus-them stance that arrogantly ignores our common connection."

Changing the Dynamics

When Ariana Grande and other global music stars performed a benefit concert

June 4th to honor the victims of the Manchester terrorist attack, they sent an important message: In the face of aggression, even in pain and insufferable grief, people are not divided by their differences but united by their humanity. It is a strong stance in defiance of hate.

We hope the Fearless Global Citizen campaign will also play a small role in changing the dynamics of what is the norm in today's society. And we hope fearless global citizens will wear the label proudly—bold and unafraid to explore this beautiful world and the exceptional individuals who inhabit it. Today, more than ever, we need them. ●



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