Among all public diplomacy programs, international exchange programs are hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. CPD recently sat down with a dozen leaders in the field of international exchange to share perspectives and practices in navigating the challenging dynamics posed by the pandemic, the resulting needs and demands, and to more creatively explore plans for the future. The challenges are manifold, from logistic and technical to financial and strategic. Still, the current disruption also provides opportunities to reflect on past models and to design new ones.

Can international exchange take place virtually as well as it does in person to advance mutual understanding or form partnerships for collaboration? To answer this and similar questions, the following four themes were explored at the roundtable.

Exploring the benefits of virtual programming

Reimagining international exchange and cross-cultural connections for a world that operates mostly virtually is difficult without physical proximity of people. At the same time, leaders are evaluating the right balance between virtual and in-person components of post-pandemic programs. There is a
dearth of research on comparing exchange experiences across the physical and virtual worlds to
guide strategic planning for virtual and hybrid models. While it is important to be realistic about what
is possible virtually, it is also possible to break down the barriers to participation such as distance or
disabilities because of virtual programs. Virtual programming could further broaden the scope of
eligible program participants across various demographics. For example, an exchange program
designed for a younger population that is tech-savvy might be quite effective, even without the in-
person aspect. As part of hybrid programs, with both virtual and in-person components, some
program administrators see benefit in providing educational material digitally before a physical visit
and collaboration takes place, then maintaining the connections virtually.

Assessing exchange networks as resources

From the International Visitors Leadership program to a non-governmental dance collaboration
project, many exchange programs have developed a network of alumni and a network of partners
over the years. There is a broad need among program administers to gain better knowledge about
their networks, their composition and value, and to strategize for maintaining and enhancing their
networks. A crucial step in harnessing the network effect of international exchange is to apply
network analysis tools to uncover the nature and performance of existing alumni and partner
networks. Such analysis will allow us to better understand network structure and network
performance capacity, which could be beneficial for strategizing future plans and prioritizing resource
allocation. Network analysis can complement other analyses to guide how networks of partners can
be strengthened as messengers.

It is imperative to take advantage of the slowdown of some programs to focus on systematic changes and on
reimagining international exchange to make it efficiently hybrid, more just and inclusive.

Making exchange more just and inclusive

Addressing issues related to social justice is front and central to the development of exchange
programs to make them more inclusive, just and accessible for people with diverse backgrounds and
constraints. A new generation of programs are being designed to further engage under-represented
audiences. Additionally, virtual collaborations could allow the participating sides to be on a more
equal setting in terms of their contribution and partnership, which could make exchanges more
meaningful and effective.

Exchange organization staff and partners can bring the diverse perspectives they have developed
from past personal or professional experiences and cultures. One ripple effect of this diversity is
potential improvements to the selection of program participants to eliminate systematic
discrimination. In the United States, the selection of host partners and American program participants
can be done such that the selected group is more representative of the country.

New skillsets for international exchange

Another important area of development is staff skills to make organizations more capable of
designing and administering hybrid (online/offline) programs. Skills such as digital storytelling,
communication, collaboration and online teaching are critical, in addition to the cultural diversity and
past experiences of staff members. There is need for an overall more tech-savvy team that works on a range of efforts, from reimagining exchanges and upgrading procedures to technology procurement and tech-enabled team communication and collaboration. Staff members need to have the skills to connect well with each other and with partners online, using technology, ethics and diversity.

Traveling, as the traditional cornerstone of exchange programs, has stopped. While it is important to acknowledge this obstacle, it is imperative to take advantage of the slowdown of some programs to focus on systematic changes and on reimagining international exchange to make it efficiently hybrid, more just and inclusive. As we examine the long-term impact of COVID-19 on international exchange, it is essential that the community explores ways to harness technology and data to advance the practice. The reimagined exchange can be a mechanism for self-reflection as much as it is about cultural promotion.