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# **Field Studies Program: Mining the Unintended Consequences**

**By**

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In July 2008, DISAM hosted nineteen ranking officers of the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, the National Police, Iraqi Special Forces and the Counterterrorism Bureau for an accelerated course in the aspects of Security Assistance most pertinent to their needs as an emerging partner nation. Over the two short weeks they were with us, each of the students participated in a number of low cost Field Studies Program (FSP) events designed to impart a lasting, favorable impression of the American way of life and the ways we as citizens interact with our government.

The Iraqi students visited the Dayton Federal Building and a local jail, toured the United States Air Force Museum and attended Wright-Patterson AFB's open-to-the-public summer air show. In addition to these events, the students were split-up into a handful of small groups and invited to dinner at the homes of several DISAM staffers and a few guests from the community. These dinners covered the entire spectrum from back patio cookouts to a semi-formal dinner party. Conversations, often via interpreters, were friendly, lively and frequently focused on sharing details of day to day life in America and Iraq. Another theme that seemed to repeat itself throughout the conversations was that of the immense gratitude the freedom-loving people of Iraq feel toward America. Some told stories of human rights abuses under the previous regime that seemed positively Orwellian: men disappearing in the night, never to be heard from again; arbitrary enforcement of the law; living under the tyranny of an elite few with no protection from their excesses. One man gripped my hand and told me with wet eyes how wonderful it was now to see his countrymen no longer living in fear of their government. "It was like living in a jail, every day, before the Americans came. Thank you all for giving us back freedom."

Hearing these sentiments so often repeated, thinking about the way life must be under a regime opposed to rights and freedom, feeling the boundless gratitude these men tried so hard to communicate with such unsuited tools as words and handshakes--all of this shook the foundations of my own outlook, and to no small degree.

Anyone who's been in the international training community longer than a week or two can tell you why we have the FSP: to foster a better awareness "out there in the world" of the way America expresses its ideal of a responsive, impartial government of, by and for the people. There are dozens of after-action reports sent in by dutiful International Military Student Officers (IMSOs) every year, each a testament to the success of FSP in achieving these goals. But little to nothing is ever mentioned about the effects these programs are having on our own citizens and communities; that's just not where the focus is. Which is why I'm writing a commentary on the unintended consequences of FSP (and by extension, the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program.)

If I was affected so strongly by one experience, and made to think harder about my own country's principles and actions, it's no great leap to imagine that many of the civilians who come in contact with our international students will be affected similarly. When we involve civilians and the community in our FSP plan, we are not just promoting an understanding of American values to our guests; we are allowing our fellow citizens to examine and reinforce those values in the crucible of honest direct communication with someone whose culture might express such values differently or to a different degree.

I do not have numbers at hand regarding how many (non-USG employed) citizens are involved in our FSP events each year. I suspect the schools with the larger throughput of international students

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do more community partnering than the schools that only see a few each year. Regardless, I hope that looking at the subject from this angle might encourage IMSOs to seek out more opportunities to include the community-at-large in their FSP events. The more we aim for these collateral benefits (using some of the tactics in the “Leveraging the Community” sidebar), the more soundly our FSP events will hit their primary mark: stronger relationships with partner nations who understand--and hopefully come to share--our vision of government as defender of internationally recognized human rights.

### Leveraging the Community

- **Look outside the fence line for sponsors**—Many bases are surrounded by ethnically rich and diverse communities, often with clusters of first, second and third generation immigrant families of similar heritage. Seek out some of these niches when you are looking for sponsors and escorts, rather than sticking to an internal “watch bill” of rotating staffers. There’s so much more to American life than the parts we see everyday in uniform, on-base or on Main Street, USA.
- **Conversation counts**—Use the rubric of the FSP program to guide discussion at FSP events. One person speaking to a group of international students about his relevant subject is wonderful. Several International Military Students (IMS) engaging in spirited face to face conversation with a handful of Americans from more motley backgrounds in a more open, social forum is better. Not only will students feel freer to ask questions and share their own worldviews, but they are far more likely to come away from the event with a warmer, more lasting and positive impression. This isn’t to say never do the lecture-speaker approach--just make sure there is adequate time for more relaxed talk afterward!
- **Sometimes the simplest things reveal the most**—It’s easy to rely on the “low-hanging fruit” of touring government buildings, media establishments, schools, businesses and museums; these sorts of things should be included in any FSP plan. But don’t discount the value of simple things that hold universal importance. Family, shelter, safety, property. Education, perhaps? A simple and low-cost Free Market event could be an afternoon walking through a few homes for sale, discussing with a friendly realtor and a cadre of community sponsors the things that are most important to local buyers and sellers. Tie your FSP events to the concerns that are basic to us all. Not only because these are the things that your community sponsors will have most in common with your international students, but also because here in the minutiae of daily life lie the details that create a lasting, personally relevant snapshot of the American way.
- **Monitor results**—It’s important to check up on your students and their escorts or sponsors regularly. Something as simple as a misconception or bad interpersonal chemistry can decimate the value of an entire event. Make sure your community sponsors are adequately screened and trained. Feedback from hosts and guests can help improve the sponsor program and widen the lanes of communication at your FSP events.
- **Most important**—Remember that communication is more than just an avenue for information delivery; it’s a two-way street. Make room for your international students to share things about their country in the course of your FSP events (elementary class visits, for example) and watch how much they learn about American life simply by answering the questions sincere and curious Americans have about their homeland.