Delivering a Citizens’ Exchange Program with a Professional Focus: Media Specialists from the Republic of Mali, West Africa, and Faculty of Oklahoma State University (OSU), USA—Triumphs, Faux Pas, and Lessons Learned

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Abstract

The U.S. Department of State (DOS) funded faculty of the OSU Department of Agricultural Education, Communications, and Leadership (AECL) to plan, deliver, and assess a citizens’ exchange program involving Malian media specialists during the summer of 2007. The DOS Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (BECA) supervised the grant-funded project (program). Most of the media specialists reported on agricultural and environmental issues.

More than 80 Malian journalists participated in a one-day orientation about the program in Bamako, Mali, during March 2007; AECL faculty led the orientation. Faculty explained the program’s purpose and invited attendees to return the next day to be interviewed for possible selection as an exchange participant; about 45 journalists were interviewed. (Mali is a Francophone country; however, because the language of the program would be English, an interviewee’s English proficiency was an important selection criterion. So, the interviews were conducted primarily in English with minimal reliance on French translation.) The project’s coordinators selected 16 journalists whose names were submitted to the U.S. Embassy in Mali for visa application interviews. Four of those were rejected; so, additional applicants’ names were provided. Ultimately, 14 journalists were granted visas for travel to the USA.

The media specialists (or “journalists”) attended five weeks of professional development training in the USA. Seminar topics were presented by professional media practitioners in Oklahoma, by faculty members in agricultural communications and education at OSU, and by other content experts. Topics included a discussion about “Americana”; “Early History of Freedom of the Press in the U.S.”; “How are American Journalists Trained?”; “The Role of the
Media in a Free Press Society”; “Focusing on Media Ethics: Identifying Personal Ethics Used in Professional Settings”; “What Does Professionalism in the Media Look Like?”; “Writing Objectively”; “Reporting on Agriculture and Agribusiness Issues”; “Overview of the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension System”; “The Media and Business Development: A Working Model”; “What Should Be the Media’s Role in Mali?”; and “Improving Professionalism in the Mali Media.” The participants also experienced internships in various media enterprises (10) appropriate for their specializations: institutional communications/public relations, print, radio, teaching, and television production/broadcasting. The internships lasted about two and one-half weeks and were supervised by OSU faculty.

Various cultural experiences were also a systematic part of the exchange program. These activities included touring museums and the Oklahoma City Bombing Memorial, watching a minor league baseball game, partaking in a 4th of July barbecue meal and celebration, touring the OSU-Stillwater campus, attending a performance of the play Oklahoma!, and adventuring on shopping and dining experiences. The Malians also attended the 2007 Agricultural Media Summit in Louisville, KY. The Summit is the largest meeting of agricultural media specialists held in the USA each year. On route to the Summit, the group toured the Heifer International facility near Perryville, AR, as well as the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, TN.

The abovementioned program not only provided a plethora of learning experiences for the Malian exchange participants but also for the OSU AECL faculty who planned, facilitated, and monitored the program. The poster presentation will include information and insights about the successful delivery of a DOS, BECA-sponsored citizens’ exchange program, including cross-cultural differences and interpersonal relationship dynamics as well as linguistic and contextually based (mis)understandings; data collection challenges; soliciting and managing internship experiences involving non-U.S. professionals; project publicity; and recruitment of exchange participants.

**Keywords:** Africa, Citizens’ Exchange Programs, Mali, Media Specialists