In 1940, prior to the U.S. entering World War II, a simple idea was put forth by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s administration to deepen America’s international alliances: *bring global leaders and influencers to the United States, give them the experience of connecting and forming relationships with communities across the nation.* This brilliant and enduring idea led to the formal creation and authorization of the flagship International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP). Since its inception, scores of other U.S. Department of State international exchange programs rely on partnering with local communities. By putting U.S. citizens at the center of these experiences, the program can leverage one of America’s greatest soft power asset: its people.

Throughout the 20th century, community-based networks developed to energize U.S. citizen engagement in foreign affairs. These included the Global Ties Network and our partners within the World Affairs Councils of America, the Foreign Policy Association, Sister Cities International, the United Nations Association of the USA (UNA-USA), Kiwanis, and Rotary. Each network has its own membership and specific purpose. Still, they share overlapping missions to inform citizens about the world, provide opportunities for active participation in foreign affairs, and communicate why investing in America’s alliances and ensuring a robust federal International Affairs budget matters for national security and prosperity at home. This brief seeks to illuminate opportunities for city and state officials to connect with activities within their own communities to increase grassroots participation in foreign affairs.

**Summary:**

- U.S. citizens are more engaged with and curious about foreign affairs and there are multiple community-based organizations ready to support these initiatives, including but not limited to members and partners of the Global Ties Network.
- International exchange and public diplomacy programs – both for U.S. and foreign citizens – are a tangible way to humanize foreign affairs and build trust to deepen U.S. alliances. They also have positive economic and socio-cultural impacts within U.S. cities.
- Engaging community-based organizations and U.S. citizens in exchange programs offers opportunities for city and state officials to develop their local workforce, provide greater international connectivity, and deepen community integration.

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The Problem

Much has been said about U.S. citizen apathy toward foreign affairs and distrust of America’s global engagement. In 2022, fewer than half of U.S. citizens owned a passport. Recently, more than half of U.S. adults said in a Pew study that the U.S. should pay less attention to problems overseas and concentrate on problems at home. For decades, mainstream news outlets have rarely focused on international news, unless it is about war, disaster, or crises immediately affecting the United States, which may limit buy-in and support for increasing global connections at the local level.

Recent research also found that U.S. officials grossly underestimate the U.S. public’s knowledge of and interest in foreign affairs: most U.S. citizens want to embrace commitments to international partnerships and alliances, recognizing the contributions those alliances and partnerships make to the U.S. economy and security. Many local communities are already globally engaged and benefit from international connections, whether they be in business, healthcare, higher education, civil society, and/or even households that depend on au pairs. Yet these activities are often disconnected from larger frameworks that can leverage their impact and broaden their appeal.

While America’s people remain a great soft power asset, they are not being meaningfully engaged in local activities that support U.S. foreign policy goals. This is a missed opportunity. City and state officials have a remedy: collaborating with local influencers who stand ready to help create stronger global connections for their communities.

The Solutions

Through their support of citizen diplomacy, a wide range of U.S. local networks foster civic engagement and participation in foreign affairs. They demonstrate to U.S. citizens the value of U.S. engagement in the world and they create interpersonal relationships that strengthen city and state diplomacy.

Economic benefits. For city and state leaders, supporting community-based engagement in foreign affairs enriches their local economies. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the Global Ties Network, through its State Department-funded international exchanges and public diplomacy activities nationwide, saw an 11:1 return on investment in federal funding. This funding, spent on international exchange and public diplomacy programs within U.S. cities and passed through to 80+ Global Ties Network community-based members, helps to generate jobs in addition to revenue through the hospitality, transportation, and retail industries. [1]

Sister Cities’ engagement has also led to significant investment in U.S. cities. This is most recently demonstrated by the sister city relationship between Phoenix and Taipei, which Mayor Kate Gallego has credited for developments such as the new Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. factory in north Phoenix.

Socio-cultural benefits. Opportunities to participate in foreign affairs activities within their communities support accelerated workforce development, build global cultural competencies, and drive greater
international connectivity, early findings from a study that Global Ties U.S. developed with the University of Southern California’s Center on Public Diplomacy have shown.[2] This engagement also creates stronger civic ties and community integration opportunities, which can help ensure that historically marginalized voices are better represented and included in foreign affairs.

**Cultivating relationships and understanding.** For the U.S. Department of State, the enduring principle and practice of including U.S. citizens in international exchange has led to global leaders’ deepening understanding of the U.S. and its democratic values, which come into sharper focus when these leaders interact with U.S. citizens. More than 90% of IVLP alumni, which includes more than 500 current and former heads of state, say they communicate more accurate information about the United States to people in their home countries because of their experience in U.S. communities.

**Building support for U.S. foreign policy.** International exchange and public diplomacy programs offer a pathway for U.S. citizens to participate in foreign affairs by meeting with and showcasing the diversity of their cities to the world’s leaders. Through these experiences, they are much more likely to engage with Congress on the need for increased International Affairs funding, which is still only 1% percent of the federal budget.

There are multiple existing programs and pathways to greater international engagement, which are available to any interested citizen and can be leveraged immediately by city and state governments. Here are just a few examples:

**Global Ties U.S.:** Leads a community-based network of 90+ nonprofits that implement the International Visitor Leadership Program, U.S. Exchange Alumni program, and other exchange programs critical to U.S. foreign policy, providing opportunities for citizens to actively engage in foreign affairs through international exchange and public diplomacy.

**World Affairs Councils of America:** Supports a network of 90 local World Affairs Councils providing programs, events, and educational initiatives on the world and America’s international role.

**Sister Cities International:** Unites tens of thousands of citizen diplomats and volunteers in almost 500 member communities with 2,000 partnerships in 140 countries, mostly focused on cultural, educational, and trade exchange.

**Rotary International:** Encompasses a global network of 46,000 clubs focused on sustainable service projects to create lasting change in communities and globally.

**Kiwanis International:** Represents a global community of clubs, members, and partners across 80 countries and geographic areas dedicated to improving the lives of children through nearly 150,000 service projects each year.

**Local Universities and Educational Exchanges:** These community-based networks often work in partnership with local universities that have international affairs offices to support international students.
and ensure that U.S. students have study and work abroad experiences. In addition to U.S. government-sponsored exchange programs for U.S. citizens, like the Fulbright Program, Critical Language Scholarships, and dozens more, there are multiple organizations focused on supporting high school engagement to create more opportunities to broaden young Americans’ worldviews – such as Youth For Understanding (YFU), AFS Intercultural Programs, and the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE).[3] Nationwide non-profits like World Savvy and Global Glimpse also build curricula focused on civics and global competence and partner with local schools to support future generations’ success in an interconnected world.

City and state leaders who set out to meaningfully engage U.S. citizens and communities in foreign affairs need to look no further than their own doorsteps. In most cities and every state, longstanding networks are already connecting people with counterparts across the world, and there are dedicated nonprofit, civil society, and higher education leaders ready to partner.

If you are a city or state leader, reach out to these local organizations to understand their work to support foreign policy priorities and discuss how you can reinforce and amplify that work, perhaps through a program that engages even more constituents. The leaders of these community-based organizations are compelling advocates for city and state diplomacy who have concrete opportunities for their fellow citizens to become active in foreign affairs.

This City & State Diplomacy Toolkit compiles a collection of case studies and how-to briefs to support the international engagement and global initiatives of local actors. These short, digestible, and practical briefs are written by local practitioners, city and state leaders, and experts based on their direct experience. If you're interested in learning more about this brief or wish to connect with the Truman team, please fill in this short survey.

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[1] For more information on the economic impact of the Global Ties Network, please visit their national and state-by-state impact reports: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ix8ffZ5Rin5J7J3Py7HxAtI4ldymUvy
[3] U.S. government-sponsored exchange programs that are open to U.S. citizens can be found at the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs website: https://exchanges.state.gov/us