



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## *Hosting the World: A Local International Visitor Program*

The many miles and cultures between Karachi, Pakistan, and Hot Springs, Arkansas, disappear for a while, as Zahid Hussain cruises Lake Hamilton on a 7 a.m. breakfast boating excursion with his American hosts. It is a relaxing time for Hussain and his travel partner, Ashok Sharma of New Delhi, India. Impressed by the natural beauty and peace of the lake, they encounter a dramatic contrast to their recently completed journalistic assignments of covering Operation Desert Storm.

It is the Fourth of July holiday. Breakfasting on homemade cinnamon rolls and fruit, the international journalists find the current assignment as guests of the local community college's president a refreshing change. The explosions and crowds the visitors will experience later in the evening will provide important comparisons and contrasts as they witness their first celebration of small-town American ideals and heritage.

Hussain and Sharma are important international guests to Hot Springs, as were the dozens before them since 1988. Sponsored by the United States Information Agency, under the auspices of the International Visitor Program (IVP), these up-and-coming world community leaders and dignitaries travel the United States for 30 days to gain direct knowledge and experience of the culture. The visitor program is designed to give foreign leaders the opportunity to meet with American counterparts and become acquainted with U.S. customs and people.

To allow for wide exposure and experiences, the visitors are scheduled by the sending agency in Washington, D.C., to visit a variety of U.S. locations, large and small, rural and urban. Each traveler typically visits six to eight communities for a few days of professional appointments, meetings, and hospitable visits in the homes of local townspeople.

### *A Typical Visit*

The hub of the local Hot Springs International Visitor Program is Garland County Community College. The college's Department of Community Services is in charge of the development, planning, and implementation of the program, which also includes dozens of local volunteers.

Tetsuma Esaki, the son and assistant to a high-ranking Democratic party leader in Japan, was one of the program's first official international visitors. Well before

Esaki landed in the U.S. for his tour, he was identified by U.S. embassy officials in Japan as an up-and-coming leader of international importance, then recruited to apply to the visitor program. Once the application and nomination were submitted to and approved by the U.S. Information Agency, Esaki was scheduled for a definite 30-day period of travel.

Working with national program officers, Esaki set a preliminary visit schedule to include specific areas of the U.S. Upon arrival in Washington, D.C., Esaki met his assigned escort and interpreter, then adjusted and confirmed his visits to several U.S. cities. His specific interests included meeting with professionals who could explain the U.S. political system and the role of political parties, visiting a rice farm, meeting with education officials at all levels, and meeting with religious and minority leaders.

Some weeks before Esaki's arrival, notification came from Washington, through the state IVP office in Little Rock to the community college in Hot Springs, that Esaki would like to spend three of his travel days in Hot Springs. A brief biography and visit theme were forwarded to GCCC, and the local system went into motion.

The college called upon local volunteers to provide professional appointments, home hospitality, and tourist activities. The press was notified, and within a few days a visit itinerary was committed to paper.

By the time he reached Hot Springs, Esaki had been in the U.S. for two weeks and had visited four other communities. He and his interpreter were lodged in a historic downtown hotel and escorted from appointment to appointment by local volunteers. During his first day in Hot Springs, Esaki met with a newspaper reporter and a photographer, then with a public school instructional supervisor, a superintendent, and several teachers. Esaki and his interpreter had some free time the first evening ("unscheduled" time is important since visitors often are over-scheduled and weary). The next day, he met with the district representative of a U.S. representative and with a national park superintendent, had lunch with business and government leaders, and spent the afternoon boating with college administrators.

The last two evenings were spent in the homes of Hot Springs families. Each family provided traditional



regional foods; and stories were exchanged about families, love, life, war, customs, poverty, hopes, and dreams. Cultural barriers seemed to melt in the warmth of the sharing experiences.

#### *Program Benefits*

Hot Springs and Garland County Community College benefit from hosting international visitors. People from other cultures and countries are relatively uncommon in this area, and it is remarkably instructive for students (college and grade school) who are exposed to the visitors through classroom visits and presentations.

Local professionals are often surprised to discover that the visitors have positive, valid perspectives to offer community leaders who are grappling with numerous civic issues and administrative concerns. The community and the college enjoy the publicity and the extensive

media coverage that accompany the visitors. The program brings some new revenue to the local economy (though negligible), since the visitors are funded by the U.S. government. An international newsletter maintains contact with the visitors and keeps interest high for hosting other visitors within the local community.

Very few local experiences allow for contact with such a diverse group of successful, intellectual, hard-working leaders from such a variety of professions and cultures. In the words of one local host, "It's quite a trip."

Steven L. Johnson, *Director, Community Services*

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## *Letter Writing: An Alternative to Term Papers*

A common student complaint about philosophy courses is that they don't seem to have any relevance to real life. To address this concern, I require students to write a letter on some controversial topic, rather than writing the typical term paper. They may not write on the most common issues, such as abortion and euthanasia, but must read the newspaper to find issues that are surfacing as "new" news.

Students first submit a one-page topic sheet and declare the issue about which they are writing, the position they are defending, and the recipient of the letter. If this assignment is completed satisfactorily, they prepare a rough draft, then the final letter. The letter must be typed in correct business letter format and submitted with a stamped envelope. [I assume responsibility for mailing all letters.] Finally, each student reads his/her letter to the class and then fields questions.

This assignment is a useful alternative to the term paper:

- It requires students to form a clear and concise position on some contemporary issue.
- Students put extra effort into completing this assignment, and the quality of the finished product is typically quite good. (Students often do not mind turning in mediocre term papers to their instructors, but they do not want to send off a poorly written letter to an important person.)

- Students get to participate in democracy. For many, this is the first time they have written a letter to the editor of a newspaper or to a politician. It gives them more confidence in expressing their thoughts and beliefs.
- It is much more enjoyable for the instructor. The instructor will have new and fresh topics to discuss and debate. This certainly is better than having to read the 367th paper on abortion that sounds curiously like most of the others.

This approach could be used in a variety of courses: in a logic course, to stress the importance of good argumentation; in an ethics course, to emphasize issues that have a moral or ethical dimension. Students feel this is a valuable learning experience, and some contact me the following quarter to share the letters *they* received. Getting a return piece of mail helps students feel that they, indeed, have participated in the world and have moved from being spectators in it.

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