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HOW TO PROVIDE MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCE IN FOOD AND NUTRITION
FOR VISITORS FROM OTHER COUNTRIES

Report of the Subcommittee on Visitors from Other Countries, Interagency
Committee on Nutrition Education and School Lunch

Many members of ICNESL have had several years of experience in working with visitors to the United States who have positions in fields related to food and nutrition in other countries. In some instances our responsibilities have begun before the visitor has arrived in this country and have ended with a final summarizing conference on the eve of her* departure. Sometimes we have been involved in only a portion of the visit, such as a call at our office to learn about the food and nutrition work of our agency.

From our firsthand observations supplemented by what our coworkers in the States and the visitors themselves have told us, we have arrived at some generalizations. Those that seem to be of primary importance are set down here in order to help us provide a richer experience for future visitors. These suggestions are applicable chiefly to the visitor who is coming to the United States for study in an educational institution or for observation of programs in the field.

The focus in the succeeding pages is on the individual visitor, though visitors frequently are dealt with in groups. Both agency and visitor usually prefer individual planning. However, what a visitor loses from taking part in a program planned to meet the needs of others may be more than offset by the opportunity for sharing experiences with fellow visitors.

Preparation for the Visit

Preparation by the visitor

The person who has sufficient warning of her approaching visit to get ready for it is almost sure to find the adjustment easier as a result. She can collect pertinent information about the United States from the United States Information Service in her country and sometimes from compatriots who have been here. If she has access to a U. S. Department of State library, she can learn about our cultural patterns from books, magazines, and newspapers. If necessary, she can practice conversing in English. She can assemble facts and illustrative material that will help her greatly to explain her work in her own country and to give the talks on related subjects that will probably be expected from her while she is in the United States.

* The feminine pronoun is used throughout the document because women constitute a great majority of the visitors concerned with food and nutrition. The suggestions are for the most part equally applicable to men.

Preparation by the responsible agencies in the U.S.A.

The agency or agencies can do more effective planning for a visitor if they are informed before her arrival on such matters as:

1. Situations in the visitor's homeland relating to the food supply, the nutritional condition of the population, and the agencies and institutions concerned with food and nutrition, especially the one with which the visitor is associated. This information can be obtained through such Departments as: State; Agriculture; and Health, Education, and Welfare. Reports from international agencies, especially FAO and UNESCO, and from United States missions currently or recently in the visitor's country, are likely to be helpful also.
2. The nature and extent of the visitor's education and experience.
3. The work that the visitor expects to do when she returns home.
4. Any specific activities that the visitor hopes to carry on in the United States and why. If she indicates a strong desire to obtain an academic degree from a specified institution, it is important to have an answer to several questions. Is she aware of the limitations that this may impose on the choice of courses to be pursued? Is her choice of institution based on full information or on chance recommendation from former students? Does her personal preference coincide with that of whoever in her country may be sponsoring her visit?

The agency in the United States primarily responsible for arrangements should draw up a tentative program in consultation with specialists in the visitor's field in other agencies, both in Washington and in the field. The dates and places of professional meetings that will be held in accessible locations during the visitor's stay should be noted.

Welcome to This Country

For a day or two after her arrival, the visitor will probably need to rest from the journey and to get acquainted with the mechanics of living in her new surroundings. It takes practice to adjust to strange foods and meal hours, to go through a cafeteria line and emerge with a satisfying meal, to get service in a hotel room where there are no buttons to press, to manage strange currency and to use public transportation.

Early contact with the person who has major responsibility for her program and welfare in this country can contribute much to helping the visitor feel at home, especially if some of the association is of a social nature.

Orientation and Planning

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A mutually satisfactory program can be worked out only if the principals can communicate effectively with each other. For that reason careful consideration should be given to the use of an interpreter. One should be present at the first orientation and planning session if there is any question of the visitor's command of English. Direct communication may be possible from the outset if agency personnel speak slowly and distinctly with appropriate reference to charts, maps, outlines and publications. Whenever possible, names, titles, and positions of persons with whom a visitor confers should be written out. Also written outlines or digests or oral presentations should be given the visitor both as help in understanding at the moment and for future reference.

Even though the agency has a pretty clear idea of the visitor's background and of what she hopes to get from her stay in this country, it is helpful to have a firsthand account from her during this first conference. It is always possible that the situation may have changed since the report was received by the agency or that the visitor's wishes have been modified in the light of further information. Going over even a satisfactory program with the visitor makes possible an explanation of the kinds of experiences that are being planned and why. It also gives her a chance to ask questions and to offer suggestions. If the schedule can be left somewhat flexible until after this first face-to-face conference, the plan that emerges is likely to be a much better one.

Terminating the first conference before the visitor who has little command of English is tired from the strain of trying to communicate may keep her from becoming discouraged.

Briefing before Field Experience

A visitor should receive sufficient orientation in Federal-State-local relationships to enable her to see in proper perspective the programs she is to observe and perhaps to participate in.

It is important for her to understand: (1) Where major responsibilities rest in programs of interest to her; (2) what the duties of Federal staff members are and how they carry out their duties; (3) what means of communication there are between Federal-State-local officials (i.e., field visits, conferences and workshops, get-togethers at national meetings); (4) why the same national program may operate differently among the States and different parts of the country.

A visitor should be given a general idea of the food and nutrition work going on in the States and communities in which she will have her field experience. As source material these documents are recommended:

1. Description of Nutrition Education and School Lunch Activities of Agencies Represented on the Interagency Committee on Nutrition Education and School Lunch, U. S. Dept. Agr. BHNHE 99, June 1953 (or more recent revision).
2. Food and Nutrition Services of Federal and Quasi-Official Agencies of the United States. U. S. Dept. Agr. BHNHE 1163, July 1952.
3. Description of Selected National Organizations Having a Primary Interest in Nutrition Programs (in preparation).

These should be made available to the visitor and supplemented by pertinent reports and publications of other governmental agencies, organizations, or institutions which she is likely to get to know in the field. For example, a public health worker should have access to Guide to Health Organizations in the United States. USPHS 196, 1953. (30 cents from Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington 25, D.C.)

A visitor should be given an opportunity to discuss and ask questions about the places to which she is going. Among the things she will usually want to know are: Geographical locations; the kind of weather to expect during her stay and the type of clothing she will need; the kind of living arrangements available; the names of some of the people she will meet who are not listed on her program; nearby places of interest to visit; and dates of meetings of professional associations that will be held in the area during her visit.

Preparation of Institution or Agency

Each institution or agency to which a visitor is going should have an opportunity to participate in planning her program, at least for that part of it for which it is to have final responsibility. The advisor in each field experience center should receive a copy of the visitor's program in the United States and a summary of her previous training and experience well in advance of her arrival in the field. Shortly before or at least coincident with her arrival, the advisor will need to be informed on what has been learned about the visitor since she has reached the United States. This information will be useful in advising as to courses, field observations, and living arrangements. Such information may well be cumulative with field experiences, each contact person being expected to pass on to the next contact important observations not previously noted about a visitor.

If the visitor is to attend an educational institution, there should be a clear understanding between the planning agency, the institution, and the visitor as to whether she is to be a special student or a candidate for a degree. It will usually be a distinct advantage for the visitor who is here for 1 year or less to be a special student with permission to take only the courses which will serve her best in her work in her own country.

Field Experience

On her arrival in the field the visitor should be given a warm welcome followed by some time to rest from travel and get acquainted with her surroundings before being plunged into activities. She should feel free to call upon her local advisor as needed.

In line with the total program outlined for the visitor, the emphasis in each center should be placed on field experiences which promise to be of the greatest benefit to her when she returns home. The visitor should have a chance to tell what she has seen and learned in previous field placements. This information will enable the advisor to relate the experiences that the visitor has already had to those planned for her in the present location. At the same time, unprofitable repetition can be avoided.

Less relevant field experiences should be included only to the extent that the visitor has the time and energy to profit from them. Visitors often complain that their schedule has been too full. Time should be left open for making notes of observations and for preparing portions of her report while impressions are still clear and gaps in information can be filled. Free time for other related activities and for rest needs to be scheduled in consultation with the visitor.

Opportunities should be arranged for the visitor to see at first hand some of the food practices and/or to observe apparent nutritional conditions of individuals toward whom programs are directed. Among the places where these things can be observed are: school lunchrooms, dining rooms of institutions or industrial establishments, nutrition clinics, food clinics in outpatient departments of hospitals, child health conferences, and above all homes of rural and urban families of various economic levels and cultural backgrounds. It is important for some visitors to see the flow of food from farm to home and to note the ease with which food moves across State lines. Arrangements could be made for them to visit such places as: Commercial farms and dairies, large city produce markets and other food processing establishments, canneries, community frozen food lockers and canning centers, retail food markets and commercial eating places.

A visitor should be informed of any workshop, institute, or other pertinent action program in food and nutrition that may be in progress in the area of her field work. If she is interested and her schedule permits, she may be given an opportunity to observe it.

All visitors should see the impact of the public school system upon the citizens of this country, whether or not their job at home is concerned with education in the schools. Whenever possible, they should have a chance to observe the teaching of nutrition in the elementary grades and in connection with home economics, health education, or science in junior and senior high schools. Those whose interest lies in professional education will welcome an opportunity to observe the teaching of nutrition and research in colleges and universities.

Each visitor may well be invited to attend any State or local meeting of professional organizations in her own or related fields that take place during her stay. Meetings of State and local nutrition committees show the close working relationships and unity of purpose among nutrition workers in various fields.

Occasional opportunities should be afforded the visitor to tell about food and nutrition programs, education, and family life in her homeland. A visitor should be expected to speak to large audiences or on the radio or television only when she does so easily and willingly.

Becoming acquainted with professional counterparts in this country in other than a work relationship is an important feature of the visitor's experience. Insofar as possible social activities, including trips to places of historic, scenic and cultural interest, should be spread over the visitor's stay rather than bunched at the beginning or end.

The visitor should remain long enough in one place to be able to profit from the visit.

Summary and Evaluation

There should be an opportunity for each visitor to summarize her experiences and to evaluate them at the end of her orientation period and at the conclusion of each stage in her field observations. When her program is completed, there should be a final evaluation covering the strengths and weaknesses of her total experience in the United States. Time should be allowed for a review of Federal-State-local relationships and interagency relationships especially in respect to food and nutrition programs of major interest to the visitor. If the visit ends in Washington, an opportunity should be afforded for contacts that could not be made earlier. To round out her experience, the visitor may wish to confer with her American counterparts in food and nutrition programs in Federal agencies and in the North American Regional Office of FAO; to see pertinent work in Washington and environs in food and nutrition and in related fields such as agriculture, public health, and social welfare; to visit the headquarters of the American Home Economics Association and the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Research Council.

Before she leaves the United States, the visitor should have a chance to think through with a person well versed in the same field how she may use in her own country the knowledge she has gained here. The visitor should be reminded that the persons who have been responsible for various aspects of her experience here will welcome an occasional informal report of how she is applying what she has learned. She should also be encouraged to feel free to write to appropriate individuals for any materials or specific information that they may be in a position to furnish. Probably the visitor during her stay here has contributed to our better understanding of the food and nutrition situation and programs in her home country. A word of appreciation for this contribution may well be in order in the closing interview.

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