Global Ideas for U.S. Solutions:

What We’re Learning about Global Study Tours to Advance a Culture of Health in the United States
How can global study tours ignite new ideas and advance a Culture of Health in the United States? This issue brief summarizes insights from the global learning activities of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and others exploring why, how, and when global study tours make sense as a learning activity, as well as ways that foundations and other philanthropic organizations might support them.

Introduction

Learning from countries with challenges similar to our own can produce valuable lessons, build relationships, deepen knowledge, inspire action, and lead to improvements in policies, programs, and systems.

This brief shares what the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is learning about the different ways to learn from abroad, specifically through global study tours. As we embrace “blue marble thinking”—the belief and practice that learning from peers around the world can lead us to new ways of doing things—we view global study tours as opportunities for rich, provocative, mind-shifting explorations.

The idea of learning from abroad is not new. Foundations, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, universities, and corporations have long used global study tours and similar types of experiential learning opportunities to explore best practices and promising approaches to programs, policy, and systems changes with potential for replication and/or adaptation in the United States. For several years, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, through its efforts to learn from abroad to improve health and well-being in the U.S., has led, supported, and/or participated in a variety of such activities as part of its journey to build a national Culture of Health in which everyone can achieve their full potential.

Because the goals, objectives, and design of study tours rely on context and are ideally tailored to the needs of their participants, this brief does not attempt to define “best practices.” Instead, it offers ideas and insights to consider when organizing such tours. It also addresses how foundations and other philanthropic organizations might deepen their support for these global learning methods—as well as the impacts they produce.

“The power of global learning is ‘blue marble thinking’—the idea that, like an astronaut looking down at the Earth, by leaving our own home, we can see it differently. It’s understanding that the vast majority of our society is a social construct, which means we have the power to change it, sometimes in radical ways. The way we do things isn’t the way we have to do things. That is, at its heart, the power of global learning.”

—Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
What is a global study tour?

“Knowledge exchange” is an umbrella term used to describe many learning activities, including study tours, also variously described as “policy tours,” “learning journeys,” or “onsite visits.” This report uses the term “global study tour” to encompass various types of global learning experiences, with onsite exchange among people from two places as a primary component. These exchanges may focus at geographic levels ranging from villages and cities to regions and countries.

How We’re Learning

This brief draws from key informant interviews and a convening of tour organizers, leaders, and participants. We spoke extensively with individuals and organizations all committed to advancing health equity and all with diverse perspectives and experience related to global study tours.

Beginning in early 2019, we conducted telephone interviews with over two dozen key informants representing RWJF, grantees, partner organizations that have led global study tours, and other organizations at the forefront of global learning. Collectively, interviews included informants from more than a dozen diverse sectors, including the justice system, education, youth development, urban planning, medicine, public health, community organizing, social work, anthropology, communications, and media. A literature scan complemented the interviews.

In August 2019, RWJF held a convening focused on global study tours and similar approaches to global learning. A primary goal was to augment and amplify lessons learned from the key informant interviews and literature scan. Attendees included more than two dozen people, including many of the key informants, RWJF staff, and additional partners.

“Move away from the idea that the purpose of a study tour is to extract information or knowledge. Instead, think about this as a reciprocal, two-way kind of experience. You want to share, listen, and absorb.”

—Jason Corburn, University of California, Berkeley
What We’re Learning

When learning from people in other countries, it’s important to learn with them. Key informants and meeting participants (“informants”) reflected on how bidirectional global learning can help advance social change. Following are some of their insights.

**Context is key. Culturally competent exchanges help participants connect with people across cultural differences.**

Before embarking on a study tour, it’s essential to understand the problem or issue at hand and its context—not only in the United States but also in the host country or city. Informants agreed: Learning from abroad starts with understanding cultural and historical constructs in your own community. These kinds of deep-seated issues can fundamentally affect how you “see” another place. For example, if participants in a tour are not well grounded in issues such as colonialism, racism, and white supremacy, global exchanges at best will fall far short of expectations, or, worse, perpetuate and accelerate harm.

One way to provide context is to prepare tour participants so that they can better connect with their hosts. Creating and sharing educational materials and resources in different learning styles—such as briefing books, websites, webinars, videos, workshops, etc.—can help participants familiarize themselves with their host organizations, cultural etiquette, social and political environment, and logistics of the tour before leaving home.

**Study tours can help shift mindsets, change narratives, and reimagine the future, but power dynamics must be addressed up front and throughout the process.**

Learning from other places can be powerful and deeply personal. The sights, smells, and sounds that participants experience can evoke a place or memory even decades later. But study tours can do more than that. By lifting up what’s possible elsewhere, global exchanges can prompt participants to rethink longstanding beliefs and envision the future with fresh eyes when they return home. Cities and countries are dynamic, and many have important change stories from which lessons on the “what” and “how” of what they did may emerge through bidirectional learning and reflection.

Although study tours can help influence or even shift cultural narratives on profound social issues, these narratives will not reflect the truths of those most affected by these issues if power dynamics aren’t recognized and addressed. From the beginning, deep, authentic, and ongoing conversations

MEDICC (Medical Education Cooperation with Cuba) oversees a project called Community Partnerships for Health Equity (CPHE), which sponsors study tours of Cuba for learning teams from communities in the U.S. To prepare for the tour, MEDICC holds a series of orientations and meetings so that the organizers get to know the participants, the communities they represent, and their priority health issues, and the participants are educated about Cuba and what to expect during their trip.

“Change starts with individuals and the ability to know the ways that culture functions—where it is and is not serving us. Global context helps us gain this perspective.”

—Ascala Sisk, Center for Community Investment
are needed about who has the power to set the agenda, to participate, to ask questions, and to share their stories in order to build relationships, learning, and changes that last.

**Study tours can help build community agency, catalyze change, and foster sustainability, especially when those most impacted are part of a bidirectional learning partnership.**

When the right people are involved, global study tours can lead to greater community agency and sustainability. To encourage change, participants and tour organizers should work with those who are “living” an issue or problem and honor their wisdom and perspectives through a two-way learning partnership. In this way, the energy and commitment of long-term residents with lived experience can generate support from those in a position to effect change.

In addition, tour sponsors and organizers should recognize that bidirectional learning can happen anywhere and consider partners from outside highly developed countries. Low and middle income countries and cities offer particularly good opportunities to learn about innovation in resource-constrained environments.

“Study tours can appear to be exploitative. The framing of what you’re trying to achieve is very important. So is having a local partner and understanding the context in which they operate, especially if there’s an uneven power dynamic.”

—Shin-pei Tsay, Make Public

The International Program for U.S. Health Care Delivery System Innovation, supported by the Commonwealth Fund, organizes study tours for U.S. health care leaders to learn about solutions from other countries. Hosts and tour participants engage fully in in-depth site visits that are designed to be valuable for everyone involved. U.S. visitors gain a deep understanding of the innovations discussed—and whether they can be adopted at home. And hosts are excited to share their experiences with leading U.S. health care organizations and have their work acknowledged publicly.
To foster sustainability, organizers will want to build time into the tour for planning next steps so that tour participants maintain their enthusiasm and momentum when they return home. After the tour, learning can be spread by asking participants to share their insights and experiences with others in their organizations or communities through presentations, videos, and blogs. Periodic check-ins and opportunities for continued sharing and peer support among study tour participants can help keep the momentum going as well. Finally, organizers may consider establishing a learning community among participants interested in adapting what they learned for implementation in the U.S., and providing a platform for sharing resources and/or technical assistance for implementation, possibly in consultation with representatives from the host country. MEDICC has taken this approach for implementing lessons learned from Cuba in local U.S. communities.

**Tour organizers should define success and impact broadly—and from multiple perspectives.**

Different people may define success differently. Whatever the desired outcomes, ideally, they should be co-created, based on what the funder, tour participants, and host organizations hope to learn from the study tour. When evaluating the results of a tour, it’s important to consider not only changes in home communities but also the relationships, skills, and knowledge-building that the tour fostered. Process and outcome measures are equally important when evaluating the success of initiatives that address deeply ingrained challenges. In addition, it’s important to provide time and space for “emergent learning” while creating mechanisms that support accountability and action upon returning home.

**Consider carefully whether media participation in a global study tour can help you share your story.**

Media coverage can help shift narratives and mindsets. For example, one tour organizer included journalists in a study tour that related to policy discussions in their home communities. When tour participants returned to the U.S., media representatives wrote articles about their experiences, which helped validate proposed policy changes. However, there are important questions to consider about including media in a study tour. Expectations about the presence of journalists, including their roles and desired outcomes, need to be clarified up front. What is the purpose of their participation? To what extent are they already interested and/or engaged in the issue? In what ways might media presence both enhance and hinder authentic participation from others? What stories will be shared, who will be “allowed” to share them, and who gets to decide? What strategies could be implemented to leverage the power of media while mitigating potential harm?

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Through Restoring Promise, leaders of U.S. prison systems learn from their peers around the world about how to transform culture and practices in their home jurisdictions. Success is measured by participants’ experiences and how those experiences are integrated into their work. Specifically, participants are supported in implementing policies and practices that advance racial equity, embed human dignity, and promote radical inclusion.

“**Not every study tour is going to generate a cover story for Time or an article in The Wall Street Journal. But think about community meetings, conferences, or public discussions regarding these topics. Study tour participants talk to thousands of people a year. Supporting them in their efforts is of great value.**”

—Steve Johnson, SeeBoundless
What Philanthropy Can Learn

There is growing interest in including global study tours in comprehensive efforts to foster two-way learning for building a healthier, more equitable society where everyone can achieve their full potential. Philanthropy has a powerful role to play.

Informants offered suggestions for philanthropic organizations to consider, including:

- Focus study tours on the “wicked problems” you and/or your grantees are addressing and where others around the world are having some success. What thorny issues are Americans struggling with, particularly with respect to health equity, that a global study tour could help to illuminate?

- Use global study tours to support grantees and leaders your foundation has begun to cultivate—including those with lived experience of the challenges being addressed. Convene foundation program staff and grantees with expertise and varying perspectives to work together to address issues.

- Consider global study tours that address cross-cutting themes so that staff from the sponsoring organization and its grantees can maximize learning across sectors, disciplines, and areas of focus.

- Identify and be clear about desired outcomes and invest sufficiently and flexibly in evaluation of both short-term and longer-term outputs and impacts of study tours.

- Fund study tours as one element of a more comprehensive global exchange package of services that includes support for implementation and continued engagement of the learning community after the study tour.

- Preserve knowledge gained from study tour experiences by sharing learning through accessible, user-friendly approaches, such as playbooks, web-based interactive tools, webinars, and videos that show how global exchanges can transform people’s hearts and minds.

- Be aware of the tendency for participants and host organizations to minimize challenges in order to “look good” in front of a funder. Help build a spirit of trust and transparency by mitigating power imbalances and participating as co-learners.

- Leverage resources and expertise by fostering collaboration across philanthropic organizations. For example, convening funders with similar interests could harvest learning, align powerful players, and encourage participation from foundations that are curious but not yet working in this space.

“Global learning is an incredible and complicated opportunity. Foundations can use their resources to allow more people to help plan and participate in global exchanges. And they can ensure these initiatives are grounded in a set of values that support a more equitable and just approach to global work.”

—Global Study Tour Convening survey respondent
Conclusion

We believe that good ideas have no borders. To ensure everyone in the U.S. has the opportunity to live their healthiest possible life, we need the world’s best ideas. When we look around the world—from Canada to Colombia, Botswana to Belgium, India to Italy—we see countries that have made progress in addressing the same kinds of challenges we face here.

By both leading and joining global study tours and talking with study tour organizers and participants, RWJF has gained insights into how to maximize their value. Our exploration of global study tours affirms their potential for learning valuable and practical lessons from abroad that may be adapted for implementation in communities in the U.S. There is much to understand on so many levels—personal, organizational, societal—and learning with others around the globe can accelerate our collective growth and help effect change.

Whether the challenge is building healthy communities, keeping children healthy, or transforming health care, bright spots abroad bring inspiration and practical solutions for how to accelerate our nation’s progress toward achieving a Culture of Health.

“Study tours allow us to take off our ‘armor’ and actually get to know each other. That’s so useful for solving challenges together. Anyone can learn what’s happening in another country through Google or a webinar, but sharing that experience with colleagues is the real secret sauce of it all.”

—Amanda O’Rourke, 8 80 Cities