

## Homestay: Why America is Missing Out

By T. Ron Davis

*“Homestay: A visit in which you pay to stay in someone’s home rather than a hotel”* (Macmillan Dictionary)

Most Americans are familiar with the concept of exchange-student programs, and yet very few people in America know about “homestay”. This knowledge gap is surprising, considering that during the 2011-2012 academic year, a mere 27,688 exchange students visited the United States, compared to 764,495 international college students—up to 20 percent of whom wanted to stay in an American home during their visit (data provided by IIE and CSIET). Homestay is a household word in other English-speaking countries like Australia, Great Britain, and Canada. America, however, has not yet embraced the trend, making available hosts few and far between. The result: we’re attracting fewer international students than we could be.

Distinct from exchange-student programs, homestay is a form of student accommodation provided most often to college-age students for stays ranging in length from a couple of weeks to over a year. These students, or their parents, pay a generous “hosting fee” to the host in return for their hospitality. Every year, international college students contribute more than \$21 billion to the U.S. economy and offer incalculable cultural benefits to our communities.

Australia’s population is just 7 percent that of America’s, yet it hosts 61 percent of the number of international students that we receive in the United States. The wide availability of Australian homes for student homestay is a major factor in Australia’s popularity as a student destination. Meanwhile, in America, many communities must turn away international students due to a shortage of host homes.

Until recently, homestay in America was predominantly a cottage industry, with virtually no nationwide providers and no sponsoring government agencies (unlike the exchange-student programs promoted by the U.S. State Department). Most homestay providers can place fewer than a hundred students within a specific region and support only a few educational institutions. (By way of contrast, one of the predominant homestay organizations in Australia has an “inventory” of over 30,000 hosts and places more than 10,000 students per year into private homes.) Because the American homestay industry consists primarily of small providers, it has not created the awareness required to attract hosts. As a result, the industry simply cannot keep up with the demand for student homestay. With no large national providers or government support, the industry has not been able to “professionalize” homestay by setting standards for safe, high-quality accommodations or establishing best practices in operations and business management. Homestay operations in America have, in addition, taken little advantage of technology to attract, manage, train, and support potential hosts.

It's no small task to educate the American public about a new (or, as with homestay, simply unknown) industry, given that we are constantly inundated with information. But our educational institutions, government agencies, community organizations, and local business must be more proactive in making it clear that our nation is losing access to the cultural and economic benefits offered by hundreds of thousands of international students each year. "Homestay" needs to become a recognized term in the American vernacular.

Fortunately, a new breed of "homestay management" organizations are working to solve not only the American problem of homestay supply and demand but also to create a broad national awareness of the industry—all while establishing new standards that will eventually make America a leader in international education. This new generation of homestay management is deploying state-of-the-art technology to match students with host families, as well as provide online orientation for students and mandatory training for hosts, ensuring quality and safety. These organizations provide the highest possible quality level in background checks, online payment services, professionally monitored 24/7 critical-incident hotlines, and interpreter services. Such companies are the first in the industry to substantially invest in traditional advertising and online marketing, raising awareness about the opportunities and benefits offered by international homestay in America.

Vast numbers of international students coming to America would prefer to live in an American home. The advantages to the student and the homestay host are many. The student typically will find that homestay is less expensive than other housing options. In addition, studies have documented that students staying in a home environment usually show better academic performance. Staying in an American home is also the best way to learn about American culture and offers an opportunity to constantly reinforce English speaking skills. Students can live in a safe home environment, with hosts who genuinely care about their well-being, while forging lifelong relationships. Homestay students don't have to worry about meals, furniture, utility bills, or leases. Homestay hosts and their families, meanwhile, have the opportunity to learn about another culture and become de facto "ambassadors" while generating extra income.

Global companies are beginning to invest in raising awareness about homestay in America, but it is up to all of us to use the best advertising medium out there—word of mouth—to educate our friends, families, coworkers, and communities about the industry. Sharing information will open their hearts and encourage them to open their homes, providing a truly American experience to visiting international students.

I end where I began. Everyone is familiar with exchange-student programs. Let's ensure that everyone learns about international student "Homestay in America".

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