

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-265](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

Created under the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961, the SWT program is intended to further U.S. public diplomacy by giving foreign undergraduate students short-term opportunities to experience the people and way of life in the United States. In 2005, GAO found that State's oversight was insufficient to prevent abuse of the SWT program or its participants. Since 2010, some misuses of the program by participants and criminal organizations and abuses of participants—for example, low wages and substandard living conditions—have been reported. Also, State has noted that the program's work component has often overshadowed its cultural component.

GAO was asked to report on State's oversight and implementation of the SWT program. This report examines, among other things, steps that State has taken since 2010 to strengthen program requirements as well as State's oversight of sponsors and participants. GAO reviewed program regulations and other SWT documents. GAO also interviewed U.S. officials and others involved in the program in the United States and in Bulgaria, Ireland, Turkey, and Russia, countries that GAO selected on the basis of factors such as the number of SWT participants from each country.

## What GAO Recommends

State should establish mechanisms to ensure that sponsors submit complete and consistent lists of participant fees and that this information is made publicly available. State should also provide detailed criteria for assessing the sufficiency and appropriateness of participants' cultural opportunities. State agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-15-265](#). For more information, contact Michael Courts at (202) 512-8980 or [courtsm@gao.gov](mailto:courtsm@gao.gov).

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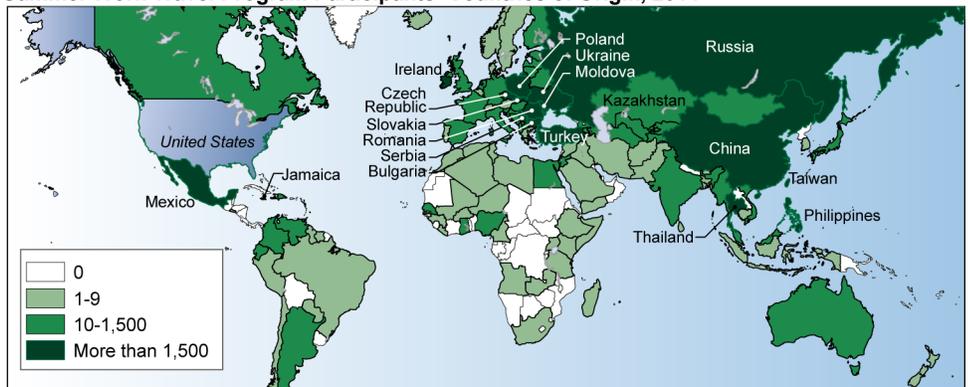
## SUMMER WORK TRAVEL PROGRAM

### State Department Has Taken Steps to Strengthen Program Requirements, but Additional Actions Could Further Enhance Oversight

## What GAO Found

Each year, college and university students from all over the world participate in the Department of State's (State) Summer Work Travel (SWT) program. State records show that in 2014, about 79,000 participants from more than 120 countries worked up to 4 months in jobs such as lifeguard, cashier, and resort worker throughout the United States (see map). Participants are meant to experience U.S. culture by interacting with Americans during work and through cultural activities in their free time. State administers the program in partnership with U.S. private sector sponsors that serve as participants' primary contacts. Program funding comes primarily from fees paid by participants and sponsors.

Summer Work Travel Program Participants' Countries of Origin, 2014



Source: GAO from State Department data; Map Resources (maps). | GAO-15-265

State has taken several steps to strengthen SWT requirements since 2010. For example, in 2011, State began requiring sponsors to verify employers and job offers and prohibited jobs such as adult entertainment and domestic help. State also capped the number of participants at 109,000 until it could determine that it had addressed identified concerns; as of October 2014, State had no plans for lifting the cap. State made further changes in 2012, such as requiring—in response to allegations of excessive participant costs—that sponsors annually submit lists of fees that SWT participants pay them and their overseas agents. State also required sponsors to provide participants cultural opportunities outside the workplace.

State oversees sponsors through both general and targeted reviews of their compliance with program requirements. State oversees participants' welfare by periodically interviewing a small number of participants and investigating complaints and reports from participants and others. However, State does not have mechanisms to ensure that sponsors submit complete and consistent lists of fees that participants pay them and their overseas agents and that this information is made publicly available. State thus has limited ability to protect participants from excessive and unexpected costs. Further, State officials told GAO that it cannot assess the sufficiency and appropriateness of participants' cultural opportunities outside the workplace because the 2012 requirement lacks detailed criteria. As a result, State cannot be assured that SWT participants' experiences of U.S. culture align with its public diplomacy goals.