

State Dept.-sponsored program promotes global understanding

By Ellie Ashford, Published October 5, 2015

Young people from developing countries spend a year at an American community college, where they gain career skills, engage in the community, learn about U.S. culture and get inspired to make a positive impact when they return home.

That's the concept behind the [Community College Initiative](#) (CCI) sponsored by the [U.S. Department of State](#) and administered by [Northern Virginia Community College](#) (NVCC) on behalf of the [Community College Consortium](#) (CCC).

The CCC promotes collegial cooperation among geographically diverse community colleges that have significant international exchange experience.

Currently nine colleges are in the CCC: NVCC, [Miami Dade College](#) (Florida), [Scottsdale Community College](#) and [Mesa Community College](#) in the [Maricopa](#) system (Arizona), [Houston Community College](#) (Texas), the [College of DuPage](#) (Illinois), [Bunker Hill Community College](#) (Massachusetts), [Kirkwood Community College](#) (Iowa) and [Northampton Community College](#) (Pennsylvania).

Cross-cultural ties

The international students are expected to participate in volunteering opportunities, community engagement experiences, experiential learning and internships, leadership training and cultural exchange activities, as well as technical training.

The students contribute "by helping U.S. colleges internationalize their campuses," says Leeza Fernand, associate director of international programs at NVCC. "When they return home, they will have a deeper understanding of U.S. culture and new skills to help them contribute to their communities and to the economic development of their countries."

The consortium is hosting 149 students this year. Thirty of them are at NVCC, split among two of the college's campuses. They hail from Indonesia, India, South Africa, Bangladesh, Egypt, Turkey, Columbia, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Brazil and Kenya.

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"Over the years, there have been a tremendous amount of success stories," as many of the former students have worked to improve life in their home countries, Fernand said. Some of them have built schools for children who wouldn't otherwise have access to an education, worked with the HIV population in South Africa or have become successful leaders in business.

As the lead college, NVCC helps the other members of the CCC implement the program and coordinates one or two meetings a year bringing all the international students together in Washington, D.C., New York, Philadelphia or Arizona.

Last year, the students met Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor and toured the Capitol, Library of Congress and Smithsonian in Washington and in New York, met diplomats at the United Nations and visited the new World Trade Center complex with 9/11 survivors.

An international perspective

Scottsdale Community College (SCC) has been in the CCI program for six years, while Mesa Community College joined the program two years ago. Together, the two Maricopa system colleges have hosted 130 international students.

The 15 students in this year's cohort at Scottsdale are from Cote d'Ivoire, Turkey, India, Pakistan, South Africa, Kenya and Indonesia. They are enrolled in business or media studies programs.

"Their presence has helped us internationalize our campus," said Therese Tendick, director of SCC's [Center for Civic and Global Engagement](#).

"They have an incredible impact on our programs by enhancing and bringing diverse perspectives to classroom discussions," added Megan O'Connor, CCI program coordinator, who notes that the students come from countries, regions or ethnic groups not usually seen at SCC. For example, SCC has hosted a Kurdish student from Turkey, a Christian from Pakistan and students from the remote Balochistan and Gilgit regions of Pakistan.

SCC requires the CCI students to be active on campus, and this year, seven of them are in student government, where “they get to see the democratic process in action,” Tendick said. Their presence has given the Americans in student government a new perspective. “They have become aware of benefits they have that others don’t have and they’ve become more globally aware,” she said.

International Education Week, an opportunity to celebrate the benefits of international education and exchange worldwide, runs Nov. 16-20.

One of the highlights of the CCI program, O’Connor said, is the long-term relationships developed between the students and their host families. Students spend two weeks with an American family when they arrive and learn about American culture from the inside. They spend the rest of their stay in apartments with the other CCI students, but the host families stay in touch, sometimes for years, and some of them have visited the students abroad.

While at SCC, CCI students put in a total of more than 14,500 hours of community services in the Phoenix area and have worked with more than 200 partnership organizations as interns or volunteers. They’ve taken the concept of community service back to their countries, O’Connor said. “It’s not just about serving our community. It’s about preparing them to be change agents when they get home.”

In most cases, they choose to volunteer with an issue they want to continue working on at home, such as women’s access to education, poverty or health care.

Tendick has seen former CCI students return to their countries armed with skills to make a difference. Dulam Satyanarayana, is a documentary filmmaker in India working on tourism films, for example, and Dahlia Oktasiani started a journalism club for high school girls in Indonesia.

Community engagement

“Global education has been a focus at Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) for a number of years,” said Vilma Tafawa, executive director of the college’s [International Center](#). This is BHCC’s third year in the CCI. The current group of 12 students are from Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt, South Africa, Columbia, Indonesia and India. They will spend a year at BHCC studying early childhood education, business or public safety.

In addition to the learning that goes on at the college, “we want to make sure they have an understanding of American culture and history,” Tafawa says. They are taken to museums, baseball games and a field trip to Philadelphia.

They also have to complete a research paper on a particular theme, which they present to a panel of experts. Last year’s topic was climate change. This year, the students chose education, with a focus on civil rights, women’s rights and corruption in education.

“When they go back to their country, they will have the benefit of knowledge and practical experience,” Tafawa said.

The international students are required to take a course in leadership development and participate in at least 100 hours of community service and 60 hours in an internship program, she said. Examples of groups they’ve worked with include Jump Start, the city of Chelsea, American Red Cross and Helping Hands.

The students also share their culture with U.S. students. That’s important because only about 1 percent of American community college students take part in study abroad programs, Tafawa said. Having a chance to interact with international students “helps our students become global citizens and gain cultural competence.”

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