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Creating Border Crossings: Dickinson College — At Home and Abroad

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AT DICKINSON COLLEGE, WE ARE COMMITTED TO PREPARING OUR STUDENTS FOR GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP. IN ORDER TO SUCCEED, OUR STUDENTS MUST BE GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO DEVELOP THE INTER-CULTURAL AWARENESS, KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND ATTITUDES THAT WILL PREPARE THEM FOR CITIZENSHIP IN OUR SOCIETY AND WORLD. UNTIL OUR STUDENTS CAN TRULY APPRECIATE THAT THEY ARE PART OF ONE WORLD AND MANY PEOPLES, AT HOME AND ABROAD, THE UNIFYING FORCE OF OUR EDUCATIONAL EFFORTS WILL NOT BE REALIZED.

Our challenge, then, is two-fold: to create an intellectual community that prepares all of its members to live creatively, productively, and harmoniously in a multicultural world; and to diversify our present campus population by providing an academic and social environment in which all students and faculty can thrive and contribute. One of the most effective ways we have found of doing this is to engage students in fieldwork with diverse communities.

Dickinson has created two programs that build student awareness, knowledge, and skills needed for the twenty-first century. The American and Global Mosaic programs have brought diverse groups of students together with residents and workers in communities both close to home (Steelton and Adams County, Pennsylvania) and as far away as Comodoro Rivadavia in Patagonia, Argentina. The Crossing Borders program brings students from three colleges to share, study, and experience different cultures together in a variety of campus contexts.

American Mosaic Program

In Steelton and Adams County, students and faculty worked in research teams with community members to collect oral histories, organize archival data, and analyze census and socio-economic data that reveal the origins and continuing development of these communities.

At its peak as a steel-producing town in the late 1800s-early 1900s, Steelton drew

immigrants from many European countries and African Americans from the South. It now claims some thirty-three ethnically diverse groups among 6,000 res-

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idents. Hit hard by de-industrialization and the gradual closing of the steel plant, its residents, schools, and businesses are now struggling economically.

Students, faculty, and residents joined together to study migration, family, work, and religion; the ways in which mill work was stratified by race and class; the interaction between Serbian and Croatian residents over time; and the diverse backgrounds of students in elementary and secondary schools. These students, with guidance from our college students, conducted their own multi-generational oral histories and brought them back into the classroom for lively discussion.

To support their research, our students were simultaneously engaged in three interdisciplinary courses on the Political Economy of De-Industrialization, Community Studies and Ethnography (a methods course), and Memoir and Narrative (a writing-intensive course). Whether in Steelton or in Adams County where students worked with Latino and Haitian migrant workers, the focus is on U.S. domestic diversity, the connections between international/global issues and domestic/local ones, border-crossings, and collaborative fieldwork.

Global Mosaic Program

Building on the national award-winning American Mosaic program, we then expanded our research to a comparative study of trans-Atlantic migration and ethnic-labor relations in the United States and Argentina. In January 2001, we took eleven students to Patagonia, Argentina to collect oral histories of people who had grown up and worked in the oil company towns of Comodoro Rivadavia. Since 1907, when petroleum was discovered near the small port of Comodoro Rivadavia, on the sparsely populated coast of central Patagonia, company towns were developed by the Argentine state and foreign companies to employ and house workers. The oil fields and the economic activities that emerged around them (services, commerce, agriculture) drew a diverse labor force from Italy, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Bulgaria, Russia, Poland, the former Yugoslavia,



Mosaic students

Greece, South Africa (Boers), and Chile, as well as internal migrants from northern Argentina. As these immigrant groups settled in the company towns and in Comodoro Rivadavia, they developed mutual aid societies, labor organizations, and religious and social organizations.

Crossing Borders Program

The Mosaic and Crossing Borders programs both were designed as innovative educational models to encourage culturally diverse students to live, work, and study together in multiple contexts both within the United States and abroad. Dickinson College is a historically white college, and remains predominantly so. We are challenged to engage primarily white students in meaningful dialogues about diversity, even as we work actively to diversify the student and faculty body. Paradoxically, many of our “white” students report feeling very comfortable at Dickinson when they first visit the campus and when they enroll, yet they also are disappointed by its lack of diversity.

With a strong record of excellent global education programs, Dickinson was less effective in confronting issues concerning U.S. pluralism. In order to focus on intercultural education and communication—

both across and within nations—Crossing Borders envisioned a series of crossings: personal, institutional, disciplinary, linguistic, regional, national, and international. It brings together up to twenty students from Dickinson College (a predominantly white institution [PWI]), Xavier University, and Spelman College (both historically black institutions [HBI]) to spend four weeks in the summer in Cameroon, West Africa. Students then return to Dickinson College for the fall semester to continue their studies of memory and representation, African diaspora, the Middle Passage, the Great Migration, and race and ethnic relations and community building in contemporary America. At Dickinson, all students take a Crossing Borders course together, in addition to three courses of their own choosing. In the spring semester, students study either at Spelman or Xavier. Thus, the program works at the intersections of global and domestic diversity as students experience a variety of border crossings, both within their group, between them as Americans and Cameroonians, and then as they return to the PWI and HBI campuses.

In all three locales, students have become much more aware of the interplay between race, class, and culture—and how it plays

out in contemporary America and Cameroon—and in their own lives and relationships. They came to more fully appreciate both the distinctiveness and importance of different experiences, standpoints, and perspectives and the similarities of experience, feelings, and values. One student commented:

I feel like I've grown a lot. I went into this thinking: they're throwing a whole bunch of white kids in with a whole bunch of black kids to see what would happen but it's been much more than that and much more of an individual thing. I feel more confident with myself and with people I don't know. I'm much more likely to reach out to others and be open. It's eerie how well this process worked—and it is a process—it's still going on.

Program Impact

These opportunities to become involved in community life, to do empirical research, to listen to others' stories as well as discover their own as part of the process, have made students' border crossings all the more meaningful and rich. Far more than diversity serving just as a multi-cultural backdrop, the Mosaic and Crossing Borders programs put diversity at the center of academic inquiry and experience. To meet the demands of the course, students must become involved and share deeply in the lives of people who are different from themselves. Diversity is not just present, it is experienced and integrated.

These students not only came to the table, they sat and ate with one another and drank deeply, lovingly—and we are all the more strong and hopeful because of it. Such growth and meaningful exchange doesn't just happen on its own. It requires thoughtful, deliberate planning to create a space within which meaningful and sustained dialogue can take place. Our very survival as a country and world are dependent upon constructing such spaces and relationships. ■