2014 Learning Cluster Students Study Around the World

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Under the generous funding support from the Luis and Linda Nieves Family Foundation, 2014 Learning Cluster students studied internationally in: Buenos Aires, Argentina; Neuchatel, Switzerland; Okinawa, Japan; Iquitos, Peru; and Piedades de Santa Ana, Costa Rica; and nationally in Boston, New York City, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco. Students grew academically and individually through their geographic immersion, course research and collaboration; and most importantly, in meeting and reaching out to the people in their study location. Upon their return to campus, Learning Cluster faculty reflected on their unique academic experiences:

Sustainable Housing and Urban Development in Argentina (Sustainable Housing in Argentina) - Buenos Aires, Argentina - Tomas Crowder-Taraborrelli, Visiting Assistant Professor of Latin American Studies

Last year, Professor Tomas Crowder-Taraborrelli led a Learning Cluster to Argentina to study and build a sustainable house in Buenos Aires. The trip was a great learning experience for everyone. We all felt this LC should be organized a second time in order to elaborate on the 2013 Sustainable Housing Learning Cluster experience. Once again, we recruited some of the same scholars, architects, and artists that made last year’s LC such a great success. We were still inspired by the same research questions: Why have homes become unaffordable for most people in the world? Is it due to the cost of land, the price of construction, property taxes, and/or public services? Why must one hire an architect or an engineer when, with limited training, one can build a home by hiring just a few workers or volunteers? How can these sustainable practices impact future growth of underdeveloped areas?
Switzerland: Federalism, Democracy and Globalization - Neuchatel, Switzerland - Oleg Gelikman, Associate Professor of Comparative Literature

This Learning Cluster traveled to Switzerland in order to bring to life the abstractions of political theory which, for better or worse, define our times, namely, democracy and globalization. Rumored to be one of the oldest democratic governments in Europe, Switzerland is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, pluralist country founded on principles protecting the primacy of participation in power, namely, federalism, direct democracy and proportional representation. How does the Swiss model of collective self-
How did governance adjust to the “global” political environment? How did it respond to the recent increase in immigration, economic pressures of global capital and cultural expansionism of media culture?

Based in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, this Learning Cluster examined first-hand the unique structure of Swiss democratic institutions. In addition to directed reading, self-study and group discussion, the student participants met with career journalists, human rights lawyers, and employees of the city of Neuchâtel. The Learning Cluster included trips to the Palace of the Nations, United Nations building in Geneva; Bern, the federal capital of Switzerland; and cultural centers and heritage sites (Paul Klee Center; Friedrich Dürrenmatt Center; Neuchâtel Museum of History and Art). Rather than a proverbial idyll, the Switzerland we found turned out to be a vibrant polity that cultivates political differences and ventures into continual interrogation of its identity.

**Living with World War II: Okinawa & the U.S. Military - Okinawa, Japan - Jay Heffron, Dean of Students and Professor of History**

Our class of twelve Learning Cluster students went to Okinawa to study firsthand the discrepancy between popular perceptions and actual outcomes of the ongoing presence of U.S. military forces on the island. We attended meetings with a variety of local government officials and civic organizations, politicians and journalists, commercial and industrial leaders, high school and college students, teachers, and administrators, as well as military authorities to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of U.S. military forward bases on the cultural, economic, and political life of the island-prefecture. We were interested in learning as much as we could about what is believed to be a complex, finely nuanced and sometimes antagonistic relationship between Japan, Okinawa and the United States.

Our research questions included, but were not limited to the following:
What are the United States ongoing strategic interests in Okinawa? How do modern Okinawans themselves, including politicians, civil society organizations, businesses, and ordinary citizens perceive those interests? What is being done to reconcile a large and ongoing U.S. military presence on the island with demands for greater local control over the current conditions and future destiny of the Okinawan people? What are the burdens of that presence, especially on the human and physical environment, and what is being done by both U.S. and Japanese authorities to reduce them? What does it mean to create a culture of peace in Okinawa? Is there resentment that must be overcome between local Okinawans and American soldiers? What are people, institutions and organizations on all sides of the basing question doing to uphold and enhance what is valuable and distinct about the culture and history of Okinawa? To the extent that it exists and can be measured, what is the nature of pro-base sentiment on the island? What are its arguments? Are those arguments taken seriously by the opposition and if so, what does the process of consensus-building look like between pro and anti-base elements on the island? Is there any room for compromise between parties to the debate or has this discursive space been compromised out of existence by the strong visceral memories of the war and its tragic consequences?

Students at the US Consul General Alfred Magleby’s private residence

Okinawa is often described negatively as a dependent economy, dependent since reversion more or less equally upon the economic assistance of mainland Japan and the many jobs afforded by a large, co-dependent U.S. military complex. What sort of sacrifices would conversion to a peace-time, demilitarized economy require of Okinawans and to what degree are they ready and willing to make these sacrifices, especially when presumably there would be little countervailing economic support from a Japanese government sworn to upholding the Japan-U.S. Security Agreement?

Through our visit we were able to gain a better understanding of how the
U.S. military bases serve both as a beneficial and a potentially disruptive force in the lives of the people, and simultaneously as a reminder of the unique history of Okinawa due to the atrocities of WWII, and what Okinawans think of the on-going presence of American soldiers there. Below is an informative website the students created for their Learning Cluster: Click here for website.

**Alien Species in the Peruvian Amazon - Iquitos, Peru - Anthony Mazeroll, Professor of Biology**

Non-native (exotic) species are the second greatest threat to global species biodiversity and extinction after land development. Fish biodiversity is especially threatened by the ecological changes caused by non-native species. There are often several reasons for the introduction of exotic species into an area: create new fishing opportunities, control pests and disease carrying insects, improve water quality, and develop aquaculture, for aesthetic reasons and/or as part of religious ceremonies. Exotics are regularly introduced with little consideration to the positive or negative impact the organism may have on the ecosystem.

This Learning Cluster course investigated the impacts of alien (exotic) species (Guppies and Blue Gouramis) on the biodiversity of the Peruvian Amazon and its tributaries in and around Iquitos, Peru. Students investigated, and more specifically, examined the damage that exotic species have on ecosystems. The following key questions guided the 12 students this Learning Cluster: Where are exotics found in and around Iquitos? How did the exotics get into the environment? What are the impacts to native species? How are the exotics affecting the environment and biodiversity of the area? What laws have been implemented to prevent the importation of exotics? How can exotics be removed from the environment?
During our 11 days in Iquitos, the students sampled river, lakes, and rainforest streams that eventually flow into the Amazon River. The students examined gut contents of exotic species to determine what food items they are consuming. This provided the students a basis of what the exotic fish are eating and the potential impacts they are having in the food resources available to the native species. In addition, students examined the reproductive biology of the exotics to determine the rate at which the populations of the exotics can increase.

**Costs and Benefits of High-Speed Rail: The Acela Corridor - Boston, Massachusetts, New York, New York and Washington, D.C. - Deike Peters, Assistant Professor of Environmental Planning and Practice**

Students on top of the High Line Park in New York City

The Learning Cluster on High-Speed Rail in the U.S., led by Professor Deike Peters, headed to the East Coast for a first-hand experience of rail travel along the North-East Corridor. Our first stop was Boston, where we met with various transit officials and even got a special behind-the-scenes tour of Amtrak's South Station control room. By mid-week, we had reached New York City where we got to compare the grandiose station architecture of NY's Grand Central Terminal with the cavernous, claustrophobic atmosphere inside Amtrak's overcrowded Penn Station. We also met with more regional planners and various transportation experts who are responsible for coordinating future investments along the entire rail corridor. Students quickly became pros in reading street and subway maps, successfully navigating dense urban environments. After three days in the Big Apple, we took a high-speed Acela train to our final destination, Washington, DC where we learned about the ambitious redevelopment plans for DC's already beautifully-restored Union Station. After eight jam-packed days of meetings and travel, students used their remaining time on campus to summarize their insights in an impressive 60-page report (Click here for...
students’ report) and in a video (Click here for video).

Students in front of the iconic Washington DC Union Station building

Conscious Capitalism – San Francisco – Marc Spencer, Ed.D., Chief Executive Officer, Juma Ventures

Students meet with Jeff Klein, CEO of Working for Good on oceanside beach in San Francisco

The course aimed to help students think about the meaning of purpose in their lives and to expose them to career possibilities where they might find personal and financial fulfillment. The students were challenged to look inward and ask of Self what really matters and look outward and examine businesses that reflect things they value. By the end of the class I believe each student left more inspired to find out what truly drives them and align that passion with their career interests.
In an effort to foster global citizenship and leadership skills, the Costa Rican Humanitarian Foundation Learning Cluster spent Week 1, studying the latest research regarding Costa Rica’s social, racial, political and economic problems, specifically as they relate to Nicaraguan immigrants living in La Carpio (outside Costa Rica’s capital), and the Cabecar and Bribri indigenous communities who are fighting for land rights.
During Week 2, we were in location in San Jose de Costa Rica. Here, we engaged in field and service learning for 7 days. Under the guidance of the Costa Rican Humanitarian Foundation leader, Gail Nystrom, we worked closely with community leaders, women and indigenous populations to assist them in eradicating inequality, attaining self-reliance and overcoming isolation. Through dialogue and on-site work, students gained insight into the perspectives and voices of the residents and reached a deeper understanding of local problems.
During Week 3, we returned to Soka University of America, and worked in small groups to design models for public policy change. These included proposals for inclusive economic growth and cultural appreciation.

*Photos contributed by Learning Cluster Participants*