

FEATURE STORY

Faculty Collaborations and Partnerships Provide Enriching International Experiences for Students

By Joan Wilder

While the poet William Blake wrote of, "seeing the world in a grain of sand," BSC Geography Professor James Hayes-Bohanan's ability to see the world in a cup of coffee has led him to squire students on study trips to the remote coffee-growing regions of Nicaragua.

For the past two years, Dr. Hayes-Bohanan has taken about 10 students each on 10-day, three-credit trips to Nicaragua where they are exposed to the politics of coffee growing. After experiencing how the Nicaraguan farmers struggle to get their fresh beans sold or dried before they rot (coffee is a fruit), the students start seeing the commodities in their everyday American lives differently.



Dr. James Hayes-Bohanan

The Hayes-Bohanan style of study trip, which immerses students in an intensive learning experience that involves spending nights in farmers' homes, is only one of many study trips BSC professors offer students. While the trips are arranged through the college's Office of International Programs, each is designed through connections the professors forge with institutions and individuals from the particular destination.

"There's a long string of connections between a trip and a coffee farmer," said Dr. Hayes-Bohanan, who made his first Nicaraguan connection through a contact at Equal Exchange. That company, which is the largest to promote the concept of Fair Trade, is located in West Bridgewater.

After an Equal Exchange spokeswoman addressed Dr. Hayes-Bohanan's environmental geography class, she put him in touch with a farmers' coffee growing co-op in Nicaragua. From there, the string of connections began – and continues – to grow.

Dr. Hayes-Bohanan will lead his second study tour to Cape Verde in June. "This trip will build on the college's extensive contacts in the country and will explore various aspects of sustainable development, from urban planning to education to agriculture," he said.

Like many who have participated in BSC study trips, Dr. Hayes-Bohanan's students have been deeply affected by their experiences. "For most of them, it really changes their life – day and night," he said. "I take what I call ordinary mall-dwelling American teenagers who've never thought about where the stuff they buy comes from" to a rural area where there's minimal electricity and everybody's a farmer.

A study trip's enriching effect on students isn't limited to those visiting developing countries. Dr. Luci Fortunato, professor of history, has taken groups of BSC students to Italy on three-week summer study trips for the last six years. She said studying abroad can change lives.

"It opens students up to very different cultural perspectives," said Dr. Fortunato. "They don't realize how closed an environment they've lived in until they get there. It broadens them in ways that are astounding."

Dr. Fortunato, who earned her undergraduate degree from Bridgewater State College, knows firsthand how affecting going abroad can be for a student. She attributes her decision to become a history professor with a specialty in Italian history to a trip she made there as an undergraduate.

"I scraped up enough money to go to Italy for a couple weeks ... and it was life changing. Now, I'm happy to be able to say to the students, 'Here's a little piece of the world'."

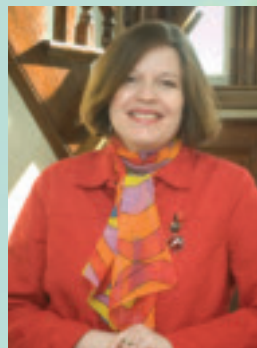


Dr. Luci Fortunato

Dr. Fortunato designs the Bridgewater in Lucca study trips with an Italian colleague she met when attending a conference in Florence in 2000. The three-week trips are undertaken in collaboration with the University of Florence and cultural institutions in the historic walled city of Lucca.

No part of the world is out as a possible destination for a BSC study trip. Among Bridgewater's upcoming trip destinations are countries as diverse as Chile, England, Japan, China, Tanzania, Cape Verde and Jordan.

Dr. Deniz Leuenberger, assistant professor of political science and public administration, has followed her political interests to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. Last March, she took a group of six BSC students to a seven-day conference of international women entitled Insight Dubai, at Dubai Women's College. The annual conference focuses on increasing cross-cultural and leadership skills in young women by studying world issues.



Dr. Deniz Leuenberger

"The conference brings women of all backgrounds together, professionals and students," said Dr. Leuenberger. The relationships the conference fostered among the young women resulted in a distance-learning project – focused on economic and environmental sustainability – between students at the two colleges. The collaborative project incorporated video technology that facilitates live

dialogues between the BSC students and those at Dubai Women's College.

Through a multitude of similar post-trip projects, student papers, articles and presentations, BSC study trip students bring their foreign experiences back to share with those on campus. ■

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