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Taking It Global

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In a May 2010 commencement speech to George Washington University graduates, first lady Michelle Obama challenged graduates to "take it global." She encouraged graduates to continue their personal and professional growth by traveling abroad. She further asserted that if we expand our geographical boundaries, we are strengthened both as individuals and as a nation. The underlying message is that diverse cultural connections enhance the quality of students' lives, and study abroad programs are critical and unique channels through which students can be prepared for global understanding and interaction.

While travel abroad has been a part of affluent American culture since our country was founded, the purpose of travel abroad as it has informed study abroad programs in the past few decades and as it was expressed by Michelle Obama, is still relatively new. The European Grand Tour, which was incorporated into American education as the Junior Year Abroad in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, has evolved from an exercise in personal sophistication to a commitment to internationalism. International education recognizes that much of students' education should occur beyond the walls of the classroom and that their worldviews are shaped by their experiences. Students are thus encouraged to participate in an array of traditional and non-traditional learning that includes travel along with other social, academic, and cultural activities. Unlike the old European Grand Tour, these experiential learning opportunities are designed to challenge students' assumptions and certainties, resulting in a more engaged and meaningful experience that makes undergraduate education globally relevant and significant. This new kind of study abroad requires a more rigorous preparation for travel so that students have the background and skills they need to strengthen their relations with diverse populations from different cultural, social, and economic backgrounds.

Given these new functions of study abroad, Winston-Salem State University (WSSU) designed a summer Spanish Language Immersion Program (SLIP) in Mexico that provides an enriched educational experience and encourages foreign-language scholarship for undergraduate honors students in this Historically Black University. Designed to be affordable at a cost of $3,300 for the student (including tuition, fees, class registration, airfare,

and housing), SLIP has provided a five-week immersion experience in Queretaro, Mexico, every summer since 2002. Honors students live with host families, take courses at *El Centro Intercultural de Queretaro*, participate in cultural activities and excursions, and engage in volunteer service projects. A joint effort of the WSSU Honors Program and the Department of English and Foreign Languages, the SLIP program advances the university's mission to internationalize the campus through rigorous academic courses, robust experiential learning opportunities, and meaningful cultural enrichment activities.

In preparation for the program, participants must complete a language assessment at WSSU and demonstrate proficiency at the Intermediate Level (see ACTFL Guidelines.) The Spanish-Proficiency Assessment is designed to evaluate student proficiency in listening, writing, reading, and speaking skills. At *El Centro Intercultural de Queretaro*, students enroll in language and culture courses to earn up to seven credit hours. All courses are taught in Spanish and routinely include Advanced Spanish Conversation, Hispanic Civilization, Advanced Spanish Composition, Special Topics/Readings in Hispanic Civilization, and Junior Honors Colloquium. Junior Honors Colloquium is a mandatory one-credit course that allows students to pursue special projects and has a service learning component that requires students to volunteer at various charitable organizations in Queretaro.

The design of the program supports the "5Cs" articulated by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages: communication, culture, connections, community, and comparisons. Students enhance their **communication** skills primarily by living with Mexican families and interacting with members of the community. Daily living in Queretaro affords them the opportunity to experience and understand another **culture**, which in turn generates a renewed appreciation for their own native culture. Using the Spanish language in meaningful contexts provides the basis for making **connections** with common themes in other subject areas and disciplines so that they learn new ways of approaching subject matters in different disciplines. During the five weeks, students develop a sense of **community** that boasts a local as well as global dimension, engendering an understanding not only of the Mexican communities in Queretaro but of the immigrant Latino communities (and other immigrant groups) in North Carolina. Finally, students who participate in SLIP return with a new perspective on **comparisons**, recognizing that language learning is an important tool to understanding the uniqueness and similarities of languages, cultures, and people.

SLIP not only meets the criteria of the 5Cs, but it nurtures the cross-cultural relations that are a foundational component in WSSU's effort at internationalizing the curricula. SLIP was created in response to WSSU's plans to institute a foreign language requirement and promote study abroad, seen as

important cornerstones in the university's push toward global readiness. WSSU's internationalizing agenda is, in turn, a response to the broader University of North Carolina (UNC) recommendation contained in the UNC Tomorrow Commission's Report to expose students to international-based experiences that support the mastery of soft skills leading to global awareness and understanding. (UNC refers to the University of North Carolina, its seventeen constituent institutions, and its affiliated entities established under Chapter 116 of the North Carolina General Statutes.) The aim of the report is to determine how UNC can respond more directly and proactively to the rapidly changing, knowledge-based global economy of the twenty-first century. The report's findings and suggestions help to shape existing and future programs of individual institutions and have contributed significantly to the growth and sustainability of programs like SLIP.

Perhaps the most important success of SLIP has been its ability to tap into the exceptional pool of students in the university's honors program, who have ensured that the summer program is mutually beneficial to them and their counterparts in Mexico. This type of cultural experience helps students prepare to thrive in a global workforce rich in diversity and gives them a greater appreciation of diverse perspectives. We have come a long way since the old European Tour, now providing our students with an opportunity to engender understanding and strengthen relations with diverse populations by interacting with people from different social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. We are not just taking our students on trips; we are taking them global.

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