

Community Engagement Fellows Project Report

Study Abroad in West Africa

Irena Lambrou, Whatcom Community College

The first time I met with Travis to talk about the CE Fellows Program, I was pretty darn excited. The concept of connection and collaboration across disciplines, cultural borders and economic interests sparked a light of hope and enthusiasm within me that might have otherwise been smoldered during a rather tumultuous political campaign year. My role in the Bellingham community is not singular: I am an adjunct faculty member at Whatcom Community College, a yoga instructor at 3 Oms Yoga, and a realtor at Keller Williams. I accepted the invitation to join the CE Fellows program because, for a long time, it has felt that these different arenas of interest have had to be separate—and, that there are different understandings, assumptions and expectations of these different arenas when viewed from the outside. My commitment to the program was reinforced by my own personal goal to create more ease and efficiency as one person with three very different careers. I will outline my project and the outcome and then speak to how and why the program was instrumental in serving my own personal goal.

With the rise of globalization, the discipline of anthropology is becoming more and more necessary as a means to understand the differences between and among cultures; to acknowledge that these differences do not keep us separate from one another, but when we celebrate each other and what different cultures have to offer, we can grow stronger together. My background is in anthropology, but as a hobby I began West African dance ten years ago in Bordeaux, France. It has followed me, or perhaps I have sought it out, in all of the places I have lived since studying abroad in France over a decade ago. Although it is a dance class, the West African dance communities are so much more than that. There is a bridge built through these communities that connects West Africa to the western world, and with it is a very strong and warm sense of connection: to connect with the other dancers, to connect with the drums, and perhaps most importantly to connect with the group.

With the political environment of recent, and what seems to be a heightened sense of xenophobia, I was called very strongly to focus my proposal on creating a study abroad class in order to lead a group of students to Guinea, West Africa. This experience can bring the essence of anthropology to life for students, to a degree that could never be achieved through a textbook. It is so important, perhaps now more than ever, that we step outside our comfort box and learn to engage with others from different backgrounds and to experience the fullness of diversity in order to remember just how precious and needed it is for humanity to survive.

My project was to create and submit a study abroad proposal to Whatcom Community College by April 30, 2017. The proposal required a fleshed out schedule, a proposed budget, curriculum, as well as references and vitae. The proposed study abroad course piggybacked on an already existing annual trip hosted by Sarah Lee and Mamady Mansare from Seattle, WA. They offer a few different trip options over the winter months and they are currently coordinating with several campuses

across the U.S. to have university courses integrated into their existing trip itineraries. Travis put me in contact with a few folks at Western Washington who have led study abroad programs, and I ended up meeting with the director of Service Learning, Tim Costello, for an interview. Tim leads study abroad programs to Rwanda, and in the past to Kenya. He was a wealth of knowledge, and re-ignited my passion to follow through with the proposal as he reminded me of how meaningful study abroad programs are in our current political environment. After interviewing Tim, I was able to connect with Sarah Lee—a few days after returning from Guinea—and we spoke at length. It was wonderful to connect with Sarah Lee, and to know that she and Mamady are graciously opening their excursions to bigger institutions as they have set the groundwork for a genuine, but safe, trip to both coastal and inland Guinea, West Africa. I submitted my proposal to Whatcom Community College on schedule, and eagerly waited during the evaluation process. Ultimately, I received word that my proposal was not accepted, but attached to that email was a list of feedback/recommendations for resubmitting next year. It brought clarity to what needed to be tweaked in my proposal, and I would be happy to resubmit next year.

The CE Fellows meetings allowed me to bounce ideas off of my colleagues and peers and find both insight and support through a completely new community; a group of folks, that believe it or not in our small town of Bellingham, I had never crossed paths with prior! One thing that continues to surprise me is how kind, compassionate, and genuine people can be when given the ability to slow down and connect. Although this project was not directly influencing the Bellingham community and bridging the academic institution to the resources of our city, it actually opened up communication lines between myself, community members here and in Seattle, and also had an impact on the classes I teach at WCC. I was able to reach out to the entire group of fellows via email and ask if anyone was interested in guest lecturing for my Sustainability course at WCC—and I received overwhelming support in return.

Through the trials and errors of crafting my proposal and drafting it, not only did I have access to a group of folks willing to listen and share, but I also found Travis Tennesen to be a key component in shifting my perspective on work, and to be honest, life. Travis taught me, indirectly and perhaps without knowing, that curiosity and being in service can be applied to any career and those two key components can keep burnout at bay. And perhaps most importantly, Travis reminded me that anything is possible, but you have to first and foremost believe in yourself. I am truly grateful for my time spent with the CE Fellows program, for the community members I interacted with that grew into friendships, and for a newly ignited spark of both curiosity and creativity in approaching projects—and perhaps most importantly, grateful for the reminder that sometimes we need to un-burrow our heads, sit up, look at the world around us, and connect with each other.