

**Howard Community College**  
**The Andrew Heiskell Awards for Innovation in International Education**  
**Study Abroad at the Community College**  
**October 2009**

Howard Community College (HCC), in Columbia, Maryland nominates its Mexico Language Study Abroad initiatives in the special 2010 category “Study Abroad at the Community College” for the Andrew Heiskell Awards for Innovation in International Education.

The Mexico Language Study Abroad Program is a three-week long intensive study of Spanish and immersion into Mexican culture. Each January, the program takes place in Cuernavaca, Mexico, with participation varying from 25 to 35 students per group. Students stay with Mexican families and attend classes five days a week for six hours a day at the Universidad Internacional (UNINTER) campus. Students participate in content courses (Culture of Mexico, Art of Mexico, History of Mexico, Indigenous vs. Mexicans, etc...) along with courses focusing on conversation, idiomatic expressions, grammar. Along with various daily local outings, students have the chance to attend four required and planned excursions: Teotihuacan, Tepotzlan, the Ballet Folclorico and the Basílica of Guadalupe in Mexico City.

The Mexico Exchange Student Program has been implemented for the last 10 years. It takes place in the same location as the Mexico Language Study Abroad Program. One to three exchange students from HCC participate in the January Mexico Language Study Abroad Program and continue their stay and their studies in Mexico for the spring semester. They attend content courses and Spanish Language courses alongside Mexican students. Each exchange student is required to take a minimum of 12 credits, including at least one language course. All courses taken in Mexico have been articulated to transfer back to their individual degree program at HCC.

One to three exchange students from UNINTER attend the Fall semester at HCC where they are required to take a minimum of 12 credits of credit or non-credit courses depending on the TOEFL Test scores they earned prior to their arrival in the US. Exchange students from UNINTER live with Howard County families that have been selected by HCC. Often the families of the HCC exchange students who went to Mexico the semester prior are chosen as the hosting families. The exchange students from UNINTER are also chosen to assist with the HCC Spanish courses, as lab aides or teachers’ assistants. All courses taken at HCC have been articulated to transfer back to their individual degree program at UNINTER.

HCC has received six exchange faculty members from UNINTER in the last 10 years and has sent five HCC faculty members to UNINTER. Along with teaching Spanish courses at all levels, the exchange faculty members from UNINTER often take credit and non-credit courses at HCC.

HCC mission, “providing pathways to success” is significant as it applies to the Mexico-Language Study Abroad initiatives. In designing the program, the college pays particular

attention to cost, timing, flexibility, accessibility and partnerships in order to meet the specific needs of the community college student body: traditional students, community members and faculty.

The Mexico Language Study Abroad Initiatives grew out of the college's vision and mission for a more globally connected institution. Developed in 2000, the program has enrolled over 300 students who have developed valuable Spanish skills and have been exposed to the various and rich cultures of Mexico. As citizens of their own country and as participants in the program, they are encouraged to integrate themselves as global citizens. The Student and Faculty Exchange Programs as part of the Mexico Language initiatives reinforce the focus on global citizenry by exploring new ideas, understanding differences among people, appreciating ideas and ideology of others and grasping the importance of involvement with and for other peoples.

People and cultures are often only understood through the lens of the media. HCC's Study Abroad and Exchange Programs begin to break down stereotypes, misunderstandings, hatred and fears. The experience of living with a family, sharing their life styles, and understanding their perspective connects global citizens rather than isolating them. With its exchange program, HCC sends up to three students for a semester-long experience in Mexico annually and has hosted the same number annually. The Mexican students at HCC, in addition to their classes, often assist in a Spanish classroom in the role of teachers' assistants. HCC encourages active participation in programming and events such as our Grand Prix horse show which raises scholarship funds for HCC students and programs such as the Study Abroad programs and Exchange programs. As part of HCC benchmarking success, each year the Mexico Language study abroad program solicits feedback from the participants in order to maintain and improve the quality of the program.

HCC's Mexico Language Study Abroad initiatives focus on *removing barriers that divide cultures*. For example, the college's 2007 visit to Cuentepec as part of a required culture class gave HCC students the opportunity to understand poverty and its effects on a marginalized population, assessing how they could make a difference. On their return to the US, participants in the program purchased and delivered an impregnated milk cow to that poor and remote indigenous pueblo.

Another ongoing project for Spanish students at HCC consists of writing and illustrating children's story books that are delivered during the January Mexico Language Study Abroad Program, to CENDI schools (Mexico HeadStart). The assignment of the children's books in Spanish classes is one of the most popular components of the course because students understand the use of language in a real setting and its impact on the communities in Mexico.

The *specific needs of the Howard County community* are addressed by many aspects of the Mexico Language Study Abroad Program. Every semester the teacher exchange initiative brings a faculty member from Universidad Internacional to HCC. With their Mexican instructors,

students are able to see Spanish beyond textbook exercises and can better appreciate some of the more subtle differences of culture. Students who have studied with the Mexican faculty members have then been highly motivated to participate in our January Mexico Language Study Abroad Program or to travel abroad at a later time.

County firefighters in need of Spanish skills took a highly successful specialized course designed and implemented by an exchange instructor from UNINTER. A similar initiative in Mexico, during the Mexico Language Study Abroad program, saw Maryland police officers training in the language and culture subtleties necessary for their jobs.

HCC's Spanish language program was greatly enhanced by the adoption of a test used by UNINTER for accurate language placement. This test allowed HCC Spanish language instructors to assess the language level of each student, determine their strengths and limitations and place each student in the appropriate course level at the beginning of each semester. The results of the test allow each instructor to direct its teaching towards the students specific language needs. The test also allows the college to determine the progress of each student as it is proctored for the second time at the end of the semester. At the same time, HCC developed an online TOEFL review course for UNINTER students studying English as a second language. In addition, HCC offered a course in methodology to Mexican student pursuing a Masters degree in Teaching Spanish as second language, providing new techniques and cutting edge use of technology.

Over the years, the Mexico Language Study Abroad initiatives have encouraged *innovative approaches to the study of language and culture*. For example, students communicate in real time with real people by a programmed use of Skype in the classroom. Students at HCC and UNINTER are able to use content they have learned in class and apply it to real life situations. Skype and Facebook friendships have emerged in the global cyber space world.

Through the formal ten year partnership with UNINTER, HCC has been able to affect changes to the fabric of our student body and the greater Howard County community that it serves. The impact of the annual Mexico Language Study Abroad initiatives increases awareness for HCC students, that they are part of a world that extends beyond the physical borders of our countries. As part of these initiatives students gain a better understanding of who they are as part of their own culture and therefore can have a better understanding of other people's perspectives and ways of life.