



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## A CROSS-CULTURAL WORKSHOP ABROAD

Community college students need a variety of opportunities for studying abroad. While some of our students take advantage of semester-long opportunities for conventional course credit, most cannot be away from home for a month or longer. Some of the factors that led them to become community college students—e.g., full-time jobs, family obligations, and limited financial resources—make short-term travel more attractive. Over the last two years, Community College of Philadelphia has developed a week-long program in Merida, Mexico, to meet many of the goals of study-abroad programs in an intense, short experience.

This was our college's first study-abroad experiment, and there were essential preliminary activities. A Title VI grant from the U.S. Department of Education allowed a group of 14 faculty to study Latin America together, create a shared base of questions for cross-cultural study, and collect knowledge about the Yucatan area of Mexico, both past and present. Four years ago, I met the director of a study-abroad program who had been introducing students from Central College, Iowa, to Mexico, over the past 25 years. The Title VI faculty at our college and this experienced colleague in Mexico worked together to set study-abroad goals and to design a novel program to reach them. We then obtained support from our Offices of Student Activities and Academic Affairs to help subsidize students and keep their costs relatively low.

### Faculty-Student Collaboration

Our workshop in Mexico brings community college faculty members and students together in a cooperative venture, with an ideal mix of five teachers and 15 students. Faculty learn alongside the students, gather material and insights for later classroom use, and share knowledge from their disciplines while in Mexico. Faculty volunteer their time while the college's travel fund pays for most of their expenses, as it would for any conference where faculty present papers. On a practical

level, faculty absorb some of the costs—e.g., rental of buses—that help reduce students' fees. Students and faculty interact in small groups and solve problems together, beginning with how to use pesos, read maps, and speak Spanish!

### Interdisciplinary Perspectives

The faculty represent many disciplines, by design. Both years we have had teachers of anthropology, art, English-as-a-second-language, history, literature, music, and Spanish. Students are drawn from the classes of the participating teachers. The result is an enriched form of team-teaching—e.g., art and history teachers commenting on early Spanish-American cathedrals, literature and anthropology teachers giving alternate interpretations of a mural illustrating a creation myth from the *Popul Vuh*. Students can hear the teachers disagree and reconcile their differences.

### Cross-Cultural Analysis

The workshop has an underlying theme—to understand the complexity of cultures, including change over time and space. A first achievement in learning about another culture is defining terms, such as “Maya civilization.” The next important step is to realize the complexity of these terms. For example, Maya spoke many different languages, and their pre-Columbian practices varied from site to site. Different sites demonstrated the differences: Maya lived in Dzibilchaltun until the time of the Spanish conquerors and live there still; the site contradicts romantic descriptions of the deserted site of Uxmal “discovered” as the remnant of a “lost” civilization. The primary reason for going abroad, perhaps, is to gather evidence that reveals and tests assumptions. Students debate their tendencies to idealize what they see as pure Maya practices—such as, cooking over an open fire and hand-sewing—and to criticize blended cultures.

### Service Learning

It is important to see the difficulties that Mexicans face economically, socially, and politically, as well as their past and present achievements. Students are delighted with the joys of travel, especially the friendliness and smiles of the people in Merida's streets and



shops, and in the outlying villages and rural areas. However, one student complained about seeing the run-down henequen hacienda and signs about Alcoholic Anonymous meetings. Yet, students need to learn about the factors that have led to henequen's demise as a viable product, including new technologies and U.S. economic policies. Learning about politics, economics, or sociology while doing nothing to help seems exploitative.

A useful service-learning experience takes time and local contacts. We worked with a family of women embroiderers, helping them develop products. We visited an agricultural school; one of our students was a county agricultural extension agent—no traditional college student could match the experience she could offer. We helped school employees design tee-shirts and caps to sell for fundraising. We went to a city orphanage and brought books and games for the children. While our students enjoyed playing with the children, our time there was particularly well-spent in that we discovered a tremendous potential for collaboration, inasmuch as our college has an excellent Early Childhood Education program.

### **Experiential Learning**

Study abroad goes to the heart of experiential learning—students learn from their daily activities, whether eating different food, speaking a different language, or climbing pyramids. There is an emotional impact that classroom learning cannot replicate. Our students are diverse—Hispanic, African-American, Asian-American, and recent European immigrants. By sharing rooms in a charming small hotel, getting hot and exhausted together, and talking among themselves, they learn more about similarities and differences among and between cultures and people than they would in any classroom.

Three students from the 2001 workshop reunited in Merida in 2002; one was returning there with us, and two were transfer students in another university program abroad. They were demonstrating the lasting impact of their new interest in Latin American studies. Study abroad is a powerful experience—it can change lives even in a single week. Community college students need programs tailored to their special needs so that they can take advantage of these remarkable opportunities to open themselves to the world.

**Fay Beauchamp**, *Professor of English and Coordinator of Humanities*

For further information, contact the author at Community College of Philadelphia, 1700 Spring Garden Street, Philadelphia, PA 19130. e-mail beaufay@voicenet.com

## **NISOD's Silver Anniversary Conference**

### **Keynote Speakers**



**Jerry Sue Thornton**  
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*Cuyahoga Community College (OH)*

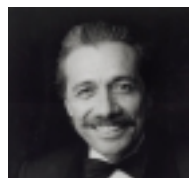


**Walter Bumphus**  
*System President*  
*Louisiana Community & Technical College System*

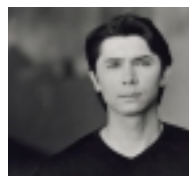
### **A Conversation with Amado and Friends**



**Amado Peña**  
*Southwest Artist and Adjunct Professor, Community College Leadership Program, The University of Texas at Austin*



**Edward James Olmos**  
*Peña Journey of Excellence Award Recipient*



**Lou Diamond Phillips**  
*Peña Journey of Excellence Award Recipient*

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*Suanne D. Roueche, Editor*

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