The Community and the World in Pennsylvania

The Mosaic programs at Dickinson College engage students in many kinds of diversity work.

By Susan D. Rose

The mission of the Community Studies Center (CSC) at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, is to design, implement, and support collaborative, community-based ethnographic and oral history research; to collect, analyze, and archive data; and to present research to college, community, and professional audiences. As described on the center's Web site, the American and Global Mosaic programs that CSC offers are "intensive, interdisciplinary, semester-long research programs designed around ethnographic fieldwork and immersion in domestic and global communities." Building on successes in global education, the college has sought to engage the sometimes more complex and difficult challenges of domestic diversity. Our strategies for deepening learning about domestic diversity include collaborative fieldwork and oral history interviews under the applied sociological framework of community studies. American and Global Mosaics programs alike involve students in fieldwork in communities both close to campus and across continents. To date, we have worked extensively in Steelton, Pennsylvania, a multiethnic, working-class community hit hard by deindustrialization; with African American communities in Steelton and Carlisle, Pennsylvania; with migrant and Latino communities in Adams County, Pennsylvania, and with the communities in Michoacán, Mexico, from which many of those migrants come; and with multiethnic communities in the oil company towns of Comodoro Rivadavia, in Patagonia, Argentina.

Mosaic Objectives

The primary objective of the Mosaic programs, as stated on the CSC Web site, is "to encourage students to think reflexively about the diverse world in which they live as they engage in collaborative work with local, transnational, and international communities." These programs "provide opportunities for students to meaningfully apply what they are learning in the classroom, both theoretically and methodologically, to the world beyond—and to bring their experiences in the world back into the classroom." They challenge students to listen to and ask questions of the people with whom they are working and to reflect on their own lives' perspectives. Faculty-student teams work with community members to design research projects that address the needs of the communities and to present what they have learned to multiple audiences. In the process, students learn how to conduct research and how to present their findings in forms ranging from research papers to documentaries, podcasts, and Web sites.

Program design is driven by pedagogical interests and research concerns as well as by community needs and interests. Some Mosaic programs may involve courses taught by two or three faculty members from different disciplines; others may involve "cluster courses" or one-credit courses that include a research trip. Such interdisciplinary, empirical field research encourages both students and faculty to encounter environments with which they may not be familiar. It challenges them emotionally as well as intellectually as they interact across lines of culture, race, class, gender, age, and religion. Such experiences enhance individuals' growth and understanding as students and as citizens of a pluralistic and increasingly diverse society. Engaging in genuinely collaborative work necessarily draws upon the resources and skills of everyone involved; it also encourages students to do their best work because

others are invested and interested in the outcomes. Perhaps most importantly, students learn skills that they can use over a lifetime to open up thoughtful, profound dialogues with others. Learning how to ask, listen, and respond goes a long way toward building bridges of understanding that can ameliorate or resolve misunderstandings and conflicts. Students and faculty alike get to practice the art of engaging in sustained dialogues, and in so doing, they reap the benefits of coming to know others, themselves, and the world more deeply.

A few of the Mosaic projects are discussed in greater detail below.

Family, Work, and Migration in Steelton

Home to the first mill dedicated exclusively to the process of making steel, Steelton was established in 1866. It drew a diverse, immigrant workforce from England, Ireland, Germany, Italy, eastern Europe, and Mexico during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A significant black population migrated from the southern United States during this period as well. Job categories in the mill, residential neighborhoods, and churches were distinguished by race, ethnic group, and class. Dramatically affected by deindustrialization, Steelton, now a diverse, working-class town of some thirty ethnic and racial groups with a population of six thousand, is struggling to survive economic hard times.

The Steelton Mosaic project was designed to involve students in an academic and experiential enterprise that put them face to face with the cultural "Other"—people of different cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds. Confronting cultural differences encourages Mosaic students to confront their own cultural identities. The project was both intellectually and emotionally enriching as all of us moved in and out of our roles as outsider-insider, participant-observer, minority member–majority member, student-teacher, apprentice-mentor. The memoir and oral history components of the course reinforced each other. During the semester, Mosaic participants became much more appreciative of the dialogic nature of the interview process and of why they needed to be aware of and value their own stories to be effective listeners, recorders, and interpreters of others' stories.

African American Community in Carlisle

In 1989–90, an interracial team composed of members of the African American community (a minister, a sixth-grade teacher, and two high school students) and the white community (an eleventh-grade English teacher, two college professors, and two college students) initiated a collaboration between the community and the college in Carlisle. Concerned about race relations in town, discrimination in the school system, the marginalization of members of the African American community, and the isolation of the Dickinson College community, we decided to have young people collect oral histories within the community. The purpose was multifold: to engage and empower young people and to legitimate academic work that spoke to their concerns; to gain greater understanding of those living within the African American community; and to record and make more available the rich history of a community that had not been included in the town's official history.

A decade later, during fall 2001, students conducted a follow-up study of Carlisle's African American community and race relations in town and on campus. This time, the Dickinson team was larger and more diverse. It included students from a qualitative research-methods class in sociology and the Crossing Borders program, which brings together up to twenty students from Dickinson and two small historically black universities in New Orleans, Xavier and Dillard.

The students were eager to work on a longitudinal community study of Carlisle, focusing once again on the African American community that is located only two blocks from campus but is rarely visited by students. The study of Carlisle and its African American community yielded a portrait of change and continuity in race relations across the twentieth century in small-town America and encouraged the development of relationships and understanding.

At first, students did not realize that they were also going to be exploring what it was like growing up white, both at the turn of the twentieth century and today. As they examined the holdings on African Americans in Carlisle at the local historical society, they became increasingly convinced of the importance of their research. Compared to the documentation of European Americans who settled in the area, the information on African Americans was very limited. Because most of the family genealogical records focused on prominent white families in Carlisle, students relied primarily on oral interviews done as part of an interracial oral history collaboration between the community and the college in 1989 and 1990, their own interviews, census data, and city directories to begin to piece together the history of the African American community in Carlisle both "then" and now.

Migrant Workers

While the fruits of their labor are visible, the migrant workers who pick the fruit remain largely invisible to most U.S. consumers. Driving along Routes 34 and 94 in the fall, on the way to Gettysburg or Washington, D.C., one sees rows and rows of apple trees laden with yellow Delicious apples, red McIntoshes, and green Granny Smiths. Hidden from view, however, are the people who pick the apples—and the peaches and pears—in the twenty thousand acres of rich farmland of Adams County, Pennsylvania. Once, white natives of the area worked the orchards, but by the 1960s most of the workers were African Americans, Haitians, and Jamaicans. Today, the vast majority are Latino seasonal migrant workers who hail from Mexico. Many work a circular migrant route, starting in Florida in the late fall or early spring picking citrus fruit and strawberries, then moving up to North Carolina for tobacco, on to New Jersey in early June to pick blueberries, and finally to Pennsylvania to pick apples in late summer and early fall.

In order to understand the lives of workers, the patterns of circular migration, and community reception, the Community Studies Center designed a semester-long Mosaic project on Mexican migration that engaged three faculty members and twenty-one students in ethnographic fieldwork and oral history. Interested in the patterns of community transformation, Mexican migration and settlement, labor and ethnic relations, and family and educational issues, we interviewed Mexican seasonal migrant workers who lived and worked in the camps and orchards, crew leaders, farm owners, Mexicans who have begun to settle in the small towns around the area, their white neighbors, government and school officials, and school teachers.

By tracking where money orders were sent, participants in the 1998 Mexican migration Mosaic project discovered that the majority of the Mexicans living in the Adams County town of York Springs, now representing 25 percent of the total population of 581residents, came from Peribán in the highlands of Michoacán, Mexico. Therefore, we added an international component to the 2003 Mosaic and took students to Peribán for the month of November to interview people there. By the end of fall 2003, we had recorded nearly ninety interviews on video and audiotape, about thirty of which have been transcribed. We also had more informal conversations with some fifteen migrant workers, most of whom were undocumented. Because of the migrants' illegal status, we took handwritten notes of those conversations and used pseudonyms.

Adams County is an important place to study in order to understand the lives of Mexican Americans, for unlike California, Texas, New Mexico, or Arizona, Pennsylvania does not share a border with Mexico. We were able to work with a relatively new ethnic community that is in the process of negotiating its place within the culture of a region of the United States that, for the most part, is new territory.

Some former Mexican migrant workers have decided to settle in the small towns that dot the county, particularly in municipalities such as Biglersville, York Springs, and Gettysburg. These more permanent residents are in the process of establishing a Mexican American community in Adams County, a development that has introduced to the region new degrees of linguistic, racial, religious, and cultural diversity. For this reason, the region provides a rich site for students interested in learning about ethnicity and multiculturalism in the United States.

For more detailed information about Dickinson College's Community Studies Center, see www.dickinson.edu/departments/commstud/index.html. More information about the Mosaic programs is available at www.dickinson.edu/departments/commstud/whatisamosaic.html, links to studyspecific Web pages can be found at www.dickinson.edu/departments/commstud/projectsmosaics.html, and a sample of video documentaries resulting from these projects can be viewed at www.youtube.com/user/CommunityStudies.

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