

Higher Degree: SCSU aims to boost study abroad

Earl H. Potter III St. Cloud State University November 23, 2014

The college experience provides students with opportunities to engage in ways that will have a strong impact on who they will be as professionals, entrepreneurs, innovators, skilled laborers and citizens in the 21st century.

Some of these opportunities are familiar — research projects, volunteering, collaborating with like-minded people. But it's the unfamiliar opportunities such as experiencing and learning about other cultures that are likely to have the most profound impact on students' personal and professional lives.

In March, St. Cloud State joined more than 160 American colleges and universities in the Generation Study Abroad initiative through the Institute of International Education to double the number of students studying abroad by 2019. Since the initiative was announced, the number of partners has grown to more than 450, including 298 colleges and universities — five from Minnesota.

This means St. Cloud State intends to move from about 350 students per year studying abroad to 700 in the next five years. On a national scale, the goal of IIE is to increase to 600,000 students studying abroad annually.

Less than 10 percent of all U.S. college students study abroad during their academic careers, according to the Open Doors Report on International and Educational Exchange published Nov. 17 by IIE. At St. Cloud State, that number is about 2 percent of our student population.

Globalization has changed the way the world works, which is one of the reasons St. Cloud State has made global and cultural understanding/awareness one of its learning commitments.

According to IIE, "Studying abroad must be viewed as an essential component of a college degree and critical to preparing future leaders." Today's graduates are just as likely to work with people from Beijing and Somalia as those from Minneapolis or Fargo, making the ability to work across cultures essential to success in all arenas.

Studying abroad leaves students with greater self-awareness and self-confidence. They gain an increased awareness of global economic and political issues and realities, and cultural understanding. While many benefits such as the ability to work across cultures and solve problems in cross-cultural contexts may not be obvious to students until after they graduate, studying abroad has been shown to improve grades and help with college graduation and retention rates.

Although still very early on in our efforts, we have seen a recent increase in interest in studying abroad already this year. As of October, St. Cloud State had 172 applications for Education Abroad for spring 2015, up 100 applications from a year ago. We know the interest is there. Now we need to do our part to help make studying abroad attainable and accessible.

Learning about other cultures through Education Abroad programs has many benefits, but there are globalization and cultural learning opportunities right here at home. It may even be as simple as saying "hello" and engaging with the person next to you in line at the bookstore. St. Cloud State has 1,117 students from 91 countries this fall, an 8.8 percent increase from 2013.

At St. Cloud State, there are 17 cultural festivals scheduled throughout the academic year, the next being African Night on Dec. 6. These public events are opportunities to learn from our students, both international and domestic, about their cultures and engage in ways that expand the global well-being of our students and the St. Cloud community.

With the Thanksgiving holiday next week, I would be remiss if I didn't also acknowledge the university's family host Thanksgiving Program. The rewards are mutual as faculty, staff and community members invite students into their homes for the holiday.

Families and students grow in their understanding of others, compare holidays and traditions around the world and enjoy the company of new friendships. National statistics suggest only 25 percent of international students will be in an American home during their time of study in the United States.

I am thankful to all faculty, staff and community members who have extended their hands of friendship to allow our students and visiting scholars the opportunity to experience and celebrate the holiday in your homes.

This is the opinion of St. Cloud State University President Earl H. Potter III. To A Higher Degree is published the fourth Sunday of the month and rotates among the presidents of the four largest Central Minnesota higher education institutions.