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REACHING THE Underserved IN STUDY ABROAD: UNH McNair Scholars explore UK; Ghana is next

by Antonio Henley

Antonio Henley is director of the UNH McNair Program. This federally funded program supports low-income, first-generation, and racial minority undergraduate students who are interested in pursuing doctoral degrees and careers in academia. Because these students are also underrepresented in study abroad programs, Henley organized a five-week pilot program in the UK last summer for a group of McNair Fellows. This coming summer McNair students will go to Ghana.

The UNH McNair Scholars Program is well poised to emerge as the national leader in undergraduate study abroad programming for underrepresented students. In summer 2010, five UNH students, representing groups traditionally underserved by study abroad, traveled to London and Cambridge to conduct research around a common theme: higher education access in the UK.

The McNair Program offers academic enrichment to students who have been disadvantaged or marginalized in traditional social or schooling systems, working to provide benefits that allow learners to compete with their more advantaged peers. Study abroad is an area of enrichment in which these students rarely participate. To change that trend, we journeyed to England to investigate higher education access issues. Prior to the trip, our McNair Fellows spent time researching the higher education system of the United Kingdom, and during the stay in London the team was challenged to re-conceptualize higher education.

Amidst the jet lag and culture shock, the students assumed that the English education system was similar to that of the U.S. However, what they learned in an intense two-week time frame proved enlightening, and highlighted several obstacles to the team’s understanding. First was the issue of structure because the British education system is considerably different from anything with which the group was familiar. Moreover, the team had to get a sense of the entire process in a matter of weeks.
Second was the financing mechanism. In fact, cost, although quite low compared to the U.S., is heatedly contested in England, and the recent increases have caused numerous riots in East London near the location where the team was in residence.

Finally, British social class presented quite a puzzle because of its rigidity and limited mobility, as the contrasting experiences on the campuses of the University of East London and Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge University brought into sharp focus. Central in importance to the team’s discovery is that class affects everything in the English education system, including who is perceived as worthy to acquire higher education.

Participants learned a great deal about the English, about academic research, and about themselves, so much so that they pleaded that the program commit to ensure that other McNair students would have a similar opportunity. In addition, since the pilot, a number of McNair directors around the country have expressed interest in the abroad initiative and our London partner has asked that UNH serve as the coordinator in the U.S. whereby other McNair students can access the abroad venture. Unfortunately, the administrative structures and resources to accommodate such access are not yet in place. However, the will to continue to afford the opportunity for underserved populations to study abroad remains resolute. Currently the UNH McNair Program is working on a research abroad venture to Ghana, West Africa, for summer 2011, where a small team of five research fellows will spend eight weeks exploring the challenges of development.

To read more about what these students learned abroad, see detailed accounts of their visit at: http://www.unh.edu/mcnair/londonabroad1.html.