

# Global Learning on Homogeneous Soil

► **Patty Lamson**, Director of the Center for Global Education and Director of the Border Studies Program, Earlham College  
**Geoff Boyce**, Academic Coordinator and Border Studies Program Instructor, Earlham College

Earlham College's global focus is built into the college's mission and exhibited in a variety of ways. Earlham's classes, events, and cocurricular activities are enlivened by a student body whose members come from over sixty countries and from across the United States. Meanwhile, almost sixty years after they were established, faculty-led off-campus study programs in locations such as Japan, Northern India, New Zealand, Ecuador, Greece, France, Germany, and Spain continue to earn high praise from both outside evaluators and "Earlhamites," nearly two-thirds of whom participate in these programs. Short-term faculty-led student/faculty collaborative research programs explore global issues and, thanks to a generous gift from Earlham alumni, the college can now provide one funded, short-term, off-campus study program to *all* of its students. This program, called the Earlham Plan for Integrative Collaboration (EPIC) Advantage, will begin in summer 2018.

Our many semester-long off-campus academic programs are designed and structured to foster life-changing, transformative experiences for students where they learn new perspectives and new ways of living and thinking. Students participate in these liberal arts programs during sophomore, junior, or senior years depending on their own academic plans and personal goals. Because these programs are an important part of an Earlham education, grades are figured into each student's official grade point average. Students participate in a course to prepare for the experience before the program begins, and they take a follow-up course after returning to the campus. The follow-up course explores skills learned and includes creative nonfiction writing, résumé, building, telling students' stories through interviews, discussions of diversity and inclusion, and a culminating project presentation.

## THE BORDER STUDIES PROGRAM

Many educators promote study abroad experiences when seeking to develop students' global and cultural competencies, but they do not consider domestic programs in the same light. Nevertheless, domestic programs generally offer powerful, high-quality, immersive experiences that foster transformative learning. When such programs are carefully designed, students can and do obtain critical shifts in perspectives through encounters with heterogeneous landscapes, histories, and realities in the United States. The success of domestic programs illustrates that students do not need to travel outside the country to have their knowledge systems destabilized. For US-based students, in fact, the "domestic" location may be more destabilizing *because* it falls within the context of their home country.

The United States/Mexico border region provides an excellent example of how a local setting can be used to unpack domestic and global realities simultaneously. This border is 2,000 miles long, with the surrounding areas defined by a long history of spatial contestation, cultural interchange, and political and economic inequalities. In the United States, the United States/Mexico border has become a flashpoint for heated debates about culture, language, immigration, border enforcement, human rights, climate change, and the call by some to build "bigger" and "better" walls.

The Border Studies Program, managed by Earlham College and approved by the Great Lakes Colleges Association, provides college undergraduates from schools from across the country a semester of study in Tucson, Arizona, and the binational Arizona/Sonora borderlands. The integrated educational program is sharply focused on a critical examination of race, culture, identity, immigration, globalization, human rights, and the impacts of international borders on each of these topics.

Throughout the semester, students not only cross geopolitical borders, but also social, cultural, linguistic, emotional, and intellectual borders. Launched in 1997, the program recently celebrated twenty years of successful immersion-based global learning in the transnational United States/Mexico borderlands.

### Program Elements

The Border Studies Program challenges students to face and struggle with complicated twenty-first-century global problems that entangle the United States with the rest of the world. The complexities of human rights, state violence, displacement, and migration inform the content and structure of the program, and the courses and the experiential components enrich one another in an integrated curriculum. What makes the program so successful is the combination of traditional academic coursework and classroom interaction with field studies, homestays, travel seminars, and the unique Spanish language approach.

Through small-group seminars, students examine the complexities of the historical, political, geographic, and economic forces that drive and shape the conditions of human migration; the ways these forces intersect with global and domestic conditions of injustice and inequality; the various social movements and civil society actors who interact with or contest these forces and conditions; and students' own place, position, and commitments in relation to these topics. In addition to small-group seminars, the program has also developed a relationship with Pima Community College in Tucson, where Border Studies students take a course on Mexican American history together with Pima students. This relationship with Pima creates spaces for a diversity of peer interactions with students who have grown up in Tucson and frequently have very different life experiences.

The field study, a critical component of the program, places students with a local organization whose work tackles important issues permeating the binational border region. Field study sites cover a range of opportunities: a bilingual elementary school, a US congressional office, binational and multicultural arts and theater, immigrant rights advocacy organizations, community gardens and local food systems, and so on. Through the field study experience, students gain hands-on experience on the front lines of some of the most critical social justice issues unfolding in the United States today, contributing to the work of an organization and in the process enriching students' overall learning outcomes.

The study of the Spanish language is a central component of the program. The Border Studies curriculum employs a language justice framework to address Spanish as a language with deep roots in the United States. As such, the program approaches Spanish as a language of the United States, rather than a *foreign* language that is merely used in the United States. In the process, students are taught to understand the politics of language as an additional component of power through which political identities and measures of inclusion and exclusion are mediated.

Students live the experience as they are placed with families in Tucson for whom Spanish is typically the dominant language. Alongside their host families, students experience and confront the daily realities of living in a border zone, including the impact of immigration laws and policies on parents, children, and extended family networks. Homestays also provide a supportive environment for students.

Finally, through guest speakers, local visits, regional travel on both sides of the border, and extended excursions to southern Mexico, students have


direct interaction with individuals and communities who are affected by migration, border policies, militarism, and globalization. They also interact with activists and communities who resist these injustices by developing alternative models. Students visit with local activists and organizers and also meet with officials from the US Department of Homeland Security. The semester includes travel to Mexican border communities to visit migrant shelters and *maquiladoras* (Mexican factories), visits to the communities on the US side who are most affected by border policies, and extended excursions to locations in southern Mexico where people are creating alternative models of existence and development for their communities and are seeking to preserve their land, culture, and autonomy.

Through courses, field studies, Spanish language, homestays, and excursions, students interact with the heterogeneous realities that define our world and the communities we inhabit. In this process, students are asked to reflect upon their own personal roles and are challenged to consider alternative practices, policies, and opportunities that would contribute to a more just world. The following guiding principles coordinate and guide our programmatic efforts and help the Border Studies community to thrive.

### Concentration on Place

The concentration on *place* is key to program facilitation. Arizona and Tucson offer ideal locations for a study of migration and borders. Different communities, cultures, and bioregions come together to provide a unique lens on national and international policies that affect people, societies, and the environment in intersecting ways.

Millions of migrants have passed through the harsh deserts of the Arizona/Sonora borderlands, and the area suffers



from one of the highest levels of fatalities among border regions. Policies that are harmful to immigrant communities such as mass incarceration and deportation are on the rise. Recent actions have added to the fear in many communities with the crackdown on DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and tough words from Washington.

Despite anti-immigrant policies, Tucson residents have a long history of pro-immigrant organizing and support. A variety of groups like No More Deaths, Tucson Samaritans, and Mariposas Sin Fronteras provide humanitarian aid and emotional support for vulnerable populations. Much of the Border Studies Program builds on this rich legacy of activism, drawing on the expertise of those in this community. Our faculty work hard to foster relationships with community partners. This involves grounding readings and perspectives in the multiple voices of the borderlands, basing our partnerships and interactions on principles of reciprocity, and ensuring that the program is accountable to the needs of local actors and communities. The program's focus on place and attention to local relationships enriches the overall learning environment, opening a wide range of opportunities for field studies, collaboration, and research.

### **An Integrated Curriculum**

The courses offered in the Border Studies Program revolve around various aspects of the program themes of immigration and international borders. The courses include Movement and Movements: A Political Economy of Migration Seminar (four credits), Field Study in the Borderlands (four credits), Mexican Americans in the Southwest (four credits), Critical Issues in the Borderlands (three credits), and the Border Studies Spanish Language Course (three credits). The same faculty plan the excursions and site visits in such a way

to ensure that all the components work together well. The content-based Spanish class contributes to the integration of the program by incorporating vocabulary and topics of the other courses, as well as by inviting members of local organizations to the class.

### **Expanded Role of Teachers**

A major goal of the program is to expand the definition of *teacher* and *expert*. Teaching happens outside the classroom in many ways. The four full-time faculty in Tucson meet regularly and work horizontally as a team to come to agreement on aspects of program management, in consultation with the program director. Some of the most meaningful learning experiences take place outside the classroom where students interact with peers, activists, workers, farmers, members of the Border Patrol, and so on. Those with lived experience have unique knowledge and perspectives and often are not included in academic life. Similarly, our faculty work with several Tucson community groups. Students often find themselves volunteering alongside their teachers and experience new kinds of interactions beyond the typical classroom relationship of student and teacher.

### **Faculty Involvement**

The Great Lakes Colleges Association (GLCA) ensures that its recognized programs have an advisory committee comprising faculty from various GLCA college campuses. In this way, faculty across the campuses learn about and contribute to the program. The advisory committee members meet in Tucson annually to visit the program, talk about new directions, and become updated on what is happening in the region, since it changes daily. Additionally, the GLCA organizes a five-year program review involving faculty and administrators from GLCA colleges.

With a generous GLCA grant, a group of faculty from several GLCA colleges were provided an opportunity to make a two-week visit to the program site in Tucson, including visits to Nogales, Sonora, Guatemala, and Chiapas, Mexico. This was a very powerful experience for all involved, and we see ongoing impact on course development and professional work on border-related themes within the various colleges and in collaborations across campuses. As a follow-up to this experience, where our faculty visited individuals and organizations on-site, the GLCA is also helping to support local organizations affiliated with the Border Studies Program to visit several of the GLCA campuses. In this way, campus faculty and students learn from those on the front lines in the borderlands. Furthermore, these campus visits facilitate regular contact with campus representatives and advisory committee members and promote reciprocity with our community partners from Arizona.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Border Studies Program, based in Tucson and the Arizona borderlands, examines global issues surrounding migration, borders, and human rights through the lens of local activists, organizations, teachers, and many others throughout a network of partners that the program has developed. It is clear from this experience that it is not necessary to travel far to unpack global realities and examine the ways that these are entwined with important debates, dynamics, and social justice struggles across the United States. In recognizing the ways that local and global issues intersect, the Border Studies Program offers a model for other domestic off-campus study programs. By using the strengths and diversities of each campus's community to unsettle students' assumptions about themselves and their place in the world, this process can lead to profound growth and learning. ■