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Editorial

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“Matriculating at a community college is often associated with failure,” write the authors of *Globalizing Curriculum and Introducing Diplomacy: Wright College’s Participation in the Diplomacy Lab Program*. This assumption, they say, centers on “a student’s lack of intelligence or wealth, as that could be the only possible explanation for receiving a low-quality education.”

This issue of SPACE tells the tale of two schools, both alike in the demographic they serve and a shared misconception that their students might not be up to the task of engaging in global citizenship projects.

Wright College, one of the City Colleges located on the northwest side of Chicago, serves a predominantly Hispanic student population. Pushing back against the cultural bias of low expectations, Wright offers students the opportunity to participate in a program called Diplomacy Lab. The program gives students the chance to conduct in-depth research on issues, chosen by the U.S. Department of State, and to propose policy solutions to global challenges. In addition to giving students the skills they can use as they move on to a four-year college and to careers, the program positions students as valued participants in global citizenship.

“I feel as though I discovered an entirely new study of politics, one that feels tangible and meaningful with real-world impacts,” writes one author, while another adds: “To be engaged with the U.S. Department of State...has been absolutely transformative in the development of research skills, policy writing, and professional or academic ambitions.”

Can a Modified Model UN Support Civic Empowerment? recounts the experiences of graduate students in the MAT program at the University of Illinois at Chicago in a service-learning project with students from Farragut Career Academy High School. The project was facilitated by Cary Bolnick, a social studies teacher at Farragut and a graduate of the MAT program, himself. Farragut is located in the Little Village neighborhood of Chicago. Bolnick joined with fellow teachers to help students complete a Model UN project focused on global warming.

With a similar demographic to Wright College, Farragut serves a predominantly lower income Hispanic population. The authors referenced what Meira Levinson calls the “civic empowerment gap” as they summarized the importance of the project:

“Studies have shown that low-income students score lower on tests of civic knowledge, participate in civic life at lower rates, and are less likely to believe in their self-efficacy to impact society and public policy. Because people of color are disproportionately low-income in the United States, young people from these historically marginalized communities are particularly shut out from participation in our democratic civic life.”

Participation in the Model UN project was a course requirement for a civics literacy course I teach at UIC. Graduate and undergraduate students in the course found the experience of doing service-learning to be both enlightening and daunting. The authors write about the joys and challenges of working with the students, all freshmen who Bolnick ultimately brought to UIC to hold their Model UN Conference. Students researched and presented points of view from nations about global warming with varying degrees of proficiency. And yet, there they were—acting the parts of global leaders on a world stage, tasked with reaching consensus to solve an issue that

often seems insurmountable. You will read what the authors learned about doing service-learning, what it was like to work with students as they developed their academic voices, and the importance of assuming student competence, regardless of socio-economic origins.

The effect both these projects had on the students and faculty involved was tangible and profound. Students at Farragut broadened their horizons not only by researching and playing the roles of world leaders, but they also demonstrated their newly developed skills at a university only a few miles from their neighborhood, helping many of them imagine being welcomed there as students after high school.

For Wright College students who participated in Diplomacy Lab, perhaps this quote best conveys the impact of their experience:

“We learned what it means to question everything, to understand the mechanisms of governments polar to ours, and to nourish our intellectual curiosity to arrive at solutions for issues of diplomacy we were not previously familiar with.”

We hope you will be inspired by what you read to consider the ways *all* people can be encouraged to position themselves as engaged and vital citizens of the world. We applaud the audacity and risk taking demonstrated by the students and faculty whose stories are told in this edition of SPACE.