

Cross-cultural learning

DALHOUSIE STUDENTS CAN SEE THE 'REAL CUBA' ON EXCHANGE

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Each year, a small group of students travel to the Caribbean and get real world experience to complement their education.

Students taking international development or Spanish at Dalhousie University can choose to immerse themselves in the Cuban lifestyle during the four-month Cuba Semester Program.

In the late 1990s, the Department of International Development found that students wanted to visit one of the countries they were studying.

The program, about to enter its 17th year, grants successful participants three full credits toward their degree.

It gives students an opportunity to “live and breathe the Cuban culture,” says Marian MacKinnon, the program coordinator.

Students must have taken two years of Spanish language courses and achieved an adequate grade in order to be accepted.

The initial two months of the trip are split into two-week sections.

Students first take a comprehensive Spanish language course that familiarizes them with the Cuban dialect, which MacKinnon describes as “very rapid.”

This training is essential. “Classroom, lectures, interviews, papers – everything is all in Spanish,” explains MacKinnon.

The next three modules are

selected by the students from a variety of options, including the history of Cuba, its economy and sustainable development.

Each module is accompanied by site visits that mesh visual culture with what is taught in the classroom.

For example, MacKinnon says, “you’ll go to the Museum of the Revolution, or you’ll go to the José Martí monument,” a memorial recognizing the efforts of a 19th century Cuban reporter and writer.

The final month of the semester is spent writing a research paper that is presented in Spanish to colleagues and faculty.

The program draws students with a variety of travel experience.

MacKinnon notes a difference between participants who have travelled a lot in the past, and those for whom this is their first foreign trip.

She says the inexperienced find the trip exciting and scary, while those accustomed to travel “are a little more relaxed in what their

expectations are.”

Whether or not they have seen the world, MacKinnon does ensure participants are aware of potential hazards.

She encourages the students to stay in groups when going out after dark, and avoid showing off expensive items they might have with them, such as cameras.

Though petty crime is a concern in Cuba, she says the country is probably safer than some.

MacKinnon cites various reasons students decide to take part

in the Cuba Semester Program. Some have heard great reviews about the program from friends, or want to compare Cuba to countries they have seen.

Others have been to the country, but only as far as the resort; they want to see the “real Cuba”.

“Everyone gets out of it what they put into it,” MacKinnon says. Though the experience isn’t always what the students expect, “after they’re in there for a month or so, generally the students, they love it.”



Marian MacKinnon coordinates Dalhousie University’s Cuba Semester Program. (Photo by Shannon Kirk)



Cathryn Parsons, 24
Medical physics graduate student, Dalhousie

“The Senate, to know the reasons behind their decisions and what was said.”



Sagar Jha, 23
President, Dalhousie Student Union

“At a private and confidential meeting between Harper and Duffy.”



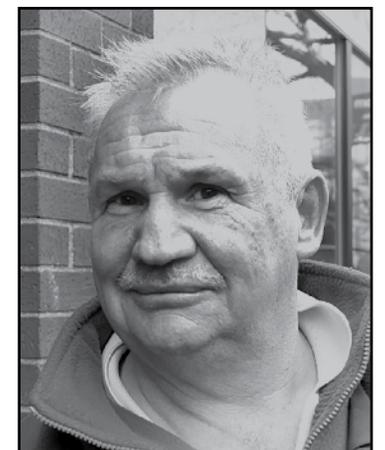
Stephanie Boudreau, 56
Receptionist and switchboard operator

“With the Queen – see what she has to say.”



Maria Vaitiekuniene, 28
Hospital volunteer

“A UN meeting that is not public to find out what’s going on in the world.”



Keith Burke, 53
Snow-remover and landscaper

“On a ceiling in a house – your house.”