



1-2009

## The Six University Consortium Student Mobility Project: Promoting Conflict Resolution in the North American Context

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### Recommended Citation

Tennent, Pauline; Senehi, Jessica; Fowler, Michael Ross; and Byrne, Sean (2009) "The Six University Consortium Student Mobility Project: Promoting Conflict Resolution in the North American Context," *Peace and Conflict Studies*: Vol. 15 : No. 2 , Article 2.

DOI: 10.46743/1082-7307/2009.1095

Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/pcs/vol15/iss2/2>

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## The Six University Consortium Student Mobility Project: Promoting Conflict Resolution in the North American Context

### Abstract

This article focuses on the North American Conflict Resolution Program - a twenty-first century mobility consortium in which universities in Canada, Mexico, and the United States exchanged students of conflict resolution. Drawing on student perceptions and, in particular, the experiences of the universities of Manitoba and Louisville, the authors discuss the positive outcomes of mobilizing students to study conflict resolution abroad for the students themselves, for faculty members involved, for university and other communities, and for the field of conflict analysis and resolution.

**Keywords:** *Canada, conflict analysis and resolution, culture, gender, Mexico, North American Conflict Resolution Program, storytelling, United States, University of Manitoba*

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## **THE SIX UNIVERSITY CONSORTIUM STUDENT MOBILITY PROJECT: PROMOTING CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE NORTH AMERICAN CONTEXT**

**Pauline Tennent, Jessica Senehi, Michael R. Fowler and Sean Byrne**

### **Abstract**

*This article focuses on the North American Conflict Resolution Program - a twenty-first century mobility consortium in which universities in Canada, Mexico, and the United States exchanged students of conflict resolution. Drawing on student perceptions and, in particular, the experiences of the universities of Manitoba and Louisville, the authors discuss the positive outcomes of mobilizing students to study conflict resolution abroad for the students themselves, for faculty members involved, for university and other communities, and for the field of conflict analysis and resolution.*

### **Introduction**

Canada, Mexico and the United States face a host of contentious social problems whose substance is often further complicated by cross-cultural misunderstandings and the lack of a single, shared North American language. Some of these issues are social; others are political, economic or ethical. Some (such as domestic violence or the inequitable treatment of minorities) occur in all three countries, while others (such as immigration or pollution) are transnational – the problems themselves reaching across our borders (Fowler *et al.*, 2002).

Across North American campuses, “conflict analysis and resolution” and “peace studies” are new and rapidly growing fields of interdisciplinary academic inquiry, exciting for students and faculty, and rich in their implications for the future welfare and progress of the continent (Byrne and Senehi, 2008). However, while the study of conflict resolution has attracted considerable attention at Canadian, Mexican and U.S. universities, extensive transnational undertakings among them have lagged behind. Few students have moved across borders to study conflict resolution in neighboring countries, and few faculties have promoted the cross-boundary, cross-fertilization of conflict resolution teaching ideas, materials, and approaches. And yet, few question the premise that all across North America future generations of leaders in a wide variety of fields must have strong

peacebuilding, negotiation, and conflict resolution skills to cope with problems arising within and among families, communities, businesses, regions, nations, and governments (Kriesberg, 1998).

As North America has become more economically and socially intertwined in recent decades, a cardinal opportunity has arisen for universities to synthesize and apply the theories and practice of conflict resolution being developed in each country. In this context six universities in Canada, Mexico, and the United States developed an educational partnership termed *The North American Consortium for a Culture of Peace*, which aimed to mobilize students, and to a lesser degree faculty, to study conflict resolution together, as North Americans rather than as citizens of the particular states. Through the promotion of student mobility, practicum placements, and faculty interaction, the Consortium hoped to illuminate North American social problems for students and to advance a shared vision of a just and peaceful continent, while greatly enriching academic offerings at the participating universities.

The University of Louisville conceived of the North American conflict resolution student exchange idea, and its Muhammad Ali Institute for Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution was quickly joined in leading the program by the Arthur V. Mauro Centre for Peace and Justice at the University of Manitoba and the Universidad de Colima, noted for its extensive student exchange programs. Secondary partners – the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the Université de Montreal, and the Universidad Autonoma de San Luis Potosí – provided valuable guidance and support. These six universities launched this novel student mobility program with financial support from Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC), the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE) of the U.S. Department of Education, and the Dirección de Desarrollo Universitario, Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) in Mexico. The partners then cooperated to prepare and then move dozens of students to foreign partner universities, where they could learn about conflict resolution in a different society, from different professors, alongside students of a different culture, and often in a different language. In this way, a project of higher education that was emphatically transnational, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary sought to leap over distance and culture to assist undergraduates to develop the ability to understand and analyze various types of conflicts and to create promising strategies for resolving them (Fowler, Byrne and Senehi, 2002).

This article is a qualitative study that catalogues the perceptions of dozens of students who participated in the *North American Conflict Resolution Program* (NACRP). It analyzes their feedback, incorporates

relevant perspectives from staff, faculty, and an outside evaluator, and provides an overview of project undertakings. This article thus provides a window on the opportunities furnished by this type of student exchange. The article focuses on the following questions:

- what conflict resolution issues did this program cover?
- how did the project function?
- what were the student-participant's perceptions of their experiences?
- what conclusions and recommendations might be derived from this effort to institute a regional conflict resolution student exchange program?

## **The Conflict Analysis and Resolution Field**

Each of the Consortium universities had its own signature areas within the conflict resolution field. Thus, each student participant could tailor a unique program of study, exploring particular conflicts, drawing on the academic specialties of particular professors, and taking advantage of particular curricular offerings and internship possibilities. For example, a Canadian student might study conflicts in communities and the particular problem of domestic violence, first by drawing on expertise at the University of Manitoba and then by studying the same subject at the Universidad de Colima, which houses one of Mexico's leading programs on the subject. While capitalizing upon each other's different approaches to and different strengths in the field of conflict resolution, each university committed to work together to initiate, develop, or expand its conflict resolution curricula and to learn from the scholarship, community initiatives, and teaching methods and materials of its partners.

The participating universities thus found it important to forge a basic common understanding of the conflict analysis and resolution (CAR) field and to identify key issues to which participants might be exposed in university classrooms and practicum experiences. Generally, academic programs in the CAR field teach students the analytical, theoretical, and practical skills necessary to analyze and design appropriate interventions in protracted conflicts (Kriesberg, 2001). Topics frequently discussed include human needs, minority rights, human security, violence prevention, indigenous peacemaking, women's peacemaking, restorative justice, cultural and gender identities, environmental sustainability, appropriate technologies for development, and peace education. Among the subjects examined are ethnic, inter-cultural, and international conflict, conflicts regarding communities and the environment, and conflict in schools, businesses, and health care institutions. The CAR field examines both direct and structural violence,

ranging from genocide and war to hate crimes, family violence, and violence against children. Social cleavages, such as class, race, religious, ethnic, or linguistic divides, are also explored (Byrne and Senehi, 2008). An overriding goal is to identify, analyze, and promote diverse nonviolent approaches for addressing social divisions in ways that meet the needs of all parties, attend to social justice, and are sustainable. Although each university had its own distinctive pedagogical approaches, each operated within this general understanding of the discipline.

The CAR field emphasizes certain key components of outstanding peacemakers, and at each university various of these arose in the effort to equip students to assess and handle conflict more skillfully, peacefully, and effectively. First, dialogue raises one's consciousness, and humanizes the other in a process of empowerment and recognition that seeks to build trust (Kriesberg, 1998). Second, personal involvement in a web of relationships builds bridges that provide nonviolent alternatives. For example, a storytelling festival with a peacebuilding ethos creates a synergy across cultures that educates participants about social issues and other cultures (Senehi, 2000, 2002, 2008). Third, transforming relationships means imagining a shared future that creates multiple scenarios to restore justice and build cultural awareness (Boulding, 1990). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, for example, was built on the foundation of restoring justice coupled with ingredients of compassion, love, and a spiritual connectedness to indigenous peacemaking systems. Fourth, each individual has a duty to contribute to making a difference, whether locally, nationally or globally, providing a sense of hope so that others can act (Barash and Webel, 2002). As Gandhi (1992) commented "peace begins with me". Fifth, oppressed people are made aware of injustice and empowered to act, encouraging people to participate in a process of transformative change (Friere, 1999). Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Mother Theresa, for example, worked to empower the poor and oppressed in the U.S. and India in nonviolent processes. Sixth, a new paradigm of thinking empowers people to visualize and work for peace, focusing on specific goals such as improving human rights, alleviating poverty, and attending to women's issues (Jeong, 2000). Finally, CAR gives us the tools to rebuild our interconnected world; and in our world we are all interconnected (Byrne and Senehi, 2008). When people ignored the plight of the migrant workers in California who developed a rare form of leukemia from the pesticides used on the grapes, for example, Cesar Chavez linked the issue to the consumers who were also being poisoned by the same chemicals. As A. J. Muste said, "there is no way to peace. Peace is the way" (cited in Chopra, 2005, p. 7).

Since third parties frequently become engaged in all levels of conflicts, another critically important feature of the NACRP involved the exploration of third-party intervention. To promote conflict resolution by transforming relationships and structures, parents, teachers, mediators, tribal elders, ombudspersons, the media, and the legal system intervene in conflict situations (Umbreit, 1995). In Africa, the moot is facilitated by tribal elders as the disputing parties reach agreement (Tuso, 1997). Each intervention process incorporates rules to help to resolve the conflict, and under particular circumstances one process may be more appropriate or more productive than another. For example, one whose rights are threatened may prefer to choose adjudication, rather than mediation or negotiation.

Students enrolled in the North American mobility program worked within the above framework, trying to gain both new understandings and practical skills related to peace making and conflict resolution. Each participant could select a course of study that featured certain common themes but which also emphasized different dimensions of conflict resolution, such as gender, culture, storytelling, negotiation, or international conflict resolution, as we elaborate below.

### *Gender*

One important aspect of conflict resolution involves the effect of gender on peace and justice. Through courses in women's studies, sociology, political science, and other relevant disciplines, and through corresponding practicum experiences, NACRP students could explore how women may become invisible and excluded from key positions of power, while male agendas have more status than female agendas. Women get co-opted by the hegemonic patriarchy, hegemonic ideology, and pattern of domination so that they lose their own discourse, autonomy, and stories (Tickner, 1993). Male dominance and privilege is a consequence of the militarized patriarchal culture that elevates males and devalues females (Enloe, 1993, 2000). There is a double colonization of objectified women by patriarchy and the men who construct the misogynist masculine culture whereby women have to accept certain assumptions about marriage, femininity, and mothering (Allen, 1996). For example, the military industrial complex depends on certain kinds of overt and hidden sexual relations in the workplace (harassment), in the home (domestic violence), and in war (rape) (Sylvester, 2002).

Tannen (1990) makes the point that males and females use and organize information on the basis of gender. Males are in ritual opposition with each other through argument, and challenge with a communication style based

around persuasion, militant and power language, and self-assertion (“report talk”). Females are oppressed into silence within the patriarchal context of the workplace and classroom changing speech patterns. Females take a relational view of others based on trust and openness including their point of view, building relationships based on shared experience (“rapport talk”). Males approach a moral problem from an ethics of rights (“legal rules”) and females from an ethics of care (“preserve the relationship”). We are thus socialized to see the world through the gender schemata we carry into conflict. CAR manages the manifestations of conflict by maintaining the patriarchal system and the power relations of domination and subordination (Taylor and Miller, 1994).

CAR focuses on a rational problem to be solved rather than the parties’ interests; the field does not place value on real needs, caring, and understanding, or on providing a localized settlement of a conflict such as wife abuse, for example, which is kept out of the public domain and policymakers’ focus (Taylor and Miller, 1994). CAR does not change the basic roots of male domination, property, and power. Transformational conflict resolution, on the other hand, can approach conflict at a deeper level to transform values, attitudes and needs in a balanced process that replaces a hierarchical means of social control (Schwerin, 1995; Woolpert *et al.*, 1998). Transformational conflict resolution can assist males and females to develop a joint cooperative understanding of the causes and the dynamics of conflict, transforming conflict from “power over” to “power with” (Baruch Bush and Folger, 1994; Byrne, 2001; Ryan, 2007). Males and females can thus weave a collective story to expand the pie to work together for change using empathy and active listening to learn to understand about the problem together (Senehi, 2000, 2002; Senehi and Byrne, 2006).

### *Culture*

As an important aspect of conflict and conflict resolution, studying culture and working cross-culturally formed another key focus of the NACRP. Often transmitted by customs, practices, language, beliefs, symbols, social practices, and institutions (Lederach, 1995), culture is created by a group, and includes within it the group’s history, identity, ideology, and worldview (Ross, 1993, 2007). Culture’s meaning is encoded in stories that provide intergenerational continuity, and explain the meaning of life (Senehi, 1996, 2000, 2002). Culture helps life to become more predictable, and allows individuals to understand others in their own cultural group: cultural values

influence what people see, hear, and feel, and how they interact with others (Cohen, 1997).

Low context cultures are monochronic, emphasizing the task, and its members compartmentalize their personal relationships, work, and many aspects of daily life (Avruch, 1998). Monochronic people frequently do one thing at a time, concentrate on the job, take time commitments seriously, follow privacy rules, respect private property, and are accustomed to short-term relationships. High context cultures are polychronic emphasizing the relationship; their members stay in close touch constantly because facets of life are seen as part of an integrated web of social relationships (Avruch, 1998). Polychronic people tend to do many things at once, tolerate interruptions, have flexible time commitments, are committed to people and relationships, change plans often, and build lifetime relationships.

When people move outside their own culture, they often continue to view life via their own cultural lens, and they attend to cues that are culturally coded; this can result in culture shock and the need to adjust to an unfamiliar social system (Tuso, 1997). Old skills of interaction do not work, stress occurs, and people take time to readjust. In cross-cultural contexts CAR requires that one understand where people are coming from by listening deeply to tap into their knowledge system to develop a critical awareness that leads to personal empowerment (Senehi, 2008). Third parties, too, are a product of their own culture's values, rules, preferences, and expectations of others (Zartman, 1995). To function effectively across cultural divides, third parties must understand how their cultural values, biases, and needs affect others, and they must strive to understand the language, assumptions about conflict, and communication style (verbal and non-verbal) of the other cultures involved (Augsburger, 1992). For example, what protocol should be used in a collectivist milieu to address a conflict? In other words, who talks first in the story, what are the seating arrangements to show respect, what are the opening rituals to be used, etc.?

### *Storytelling*

*The University of Manitoba brought to the Consortium special expertise in the area of storytelling and conflict resolution. Wherever people live, stories grow. Throughout human history, storytelling has been a means of sharing experience, bringing people together, and passing cultural knowledge and values to the next generation (Senehi, 1996). Stories nourish our moral imagination. For young people, the imagination used in storytelling is necessary for brain development, and positive stories build resiliency (Senehi*

*and Byrne, 2006). For everyone, stories – the ones that we have internalized and the stories we tell about history and our lives – are the basis of social thought and action, which makes and remakes our world (Senehi, 2002).*

## Negotiation

Negotiation might be thought to comprise another subfield of conflict resolution, one that draws on an increasingly rich scholarly literature. NACRP students at the University of Louisville took a core active-learning course entitled “Coping with Conflict: The North American Experience” that explored how people in Canada, Mexico, and the United States might contend with an array of common conflicts. Students negotiated and then analyzed realistic hypothetical cases that placed them in diverse scenarios related to business, the environment, family and community, and other local, national, and international issues. The simulations required the class to learn and practice an array of practical negotiation skills and to think through a host of important negotiation issues. Over time, the negotiations became increasingly complex and eventually placed the students in the position of negotiators handling multi-party, multi-issue scenarios that occupied entire class sessions.

Harvard Law School’s Program on Negotiation supplied each of the simulations, whose range encompassed a dispute regarding Native American laborers, a sexual harassment claim, a small claims mediation, a Nazi march in a Jewish neighborhood, a proposed ban on billboards in a city, the site of a mental health care facility, a possible campus speech by Louis Farrakhan, the use of grant monies to respond to urban homelessness, the renegotiation of a labor contract, and a negotiated rule-making effort concerning air pollution. Each class was divided among simulations, debriefings in which the assigned hypothetical disputes and ensuing student negotiations were analyzed, discussions concerning the chief issues and strategies faced by those engaged in conflict resolution, and films about the conflict resolution process.

## *International Conflict Resolution*

Many of the NACRP universities offered students coursework in international conflict resolution. Kenneth Waltz’s (1959) levels of analysis point out the connections between the individual, the state, and the international system. Interdependence exists between interstate, transgovernmental, and transnational relations as institutions with rules manage relations between states. Yet, realists assume an anarchic global

system with a hierarchy of issues ranging from nuclear proliferation to human rights, and the economic well-being of the Global South to the ecological wholeness of the Global Commons. International and non-governmental organizations work within the purview of sovereignty and international law to strive for peace within and between states (Pearson, 2001). European integration has decreased nationalism and war through economic and scientific cooperation that has spilled over into the political arena to create a working peace system (Mitrany, 1966). Track I political elites can still operate as honest brokers to mediate protracted interstate conflicts, bringing their power, prestige, and resources to the table.

In foreign policy decision making, individuals have different thinking styles that must be taken into account in a conflict milieu (Byrne, 2003). Because of their contrasting backgrounds, cultures, personalities, temperaments, and perceptions of problems through their own conceptual lenses, not all people operate with the same kind of rationality (Jervis, 1976). Individuals can avoid uncomfortable information by relying on historical analogies and wishful thinking; people might act based on misperceptions or on what they think others expect of them. Some ignore or suppress dissidents' discordant information, and by so doing limit choices of action as a resulting groupthink prevents a discussion of alternatives (Janis, 1972).

### **The North American Mobility in Higher Education Project**

How, then, did the participating universities operationalize the exploration of these and other conflict resolution themes? The ongoing North American Mobility in Higher Education (NAMHE) Project is administered and funded collectively by HRSDC, FIPSE, and the SEP. Its purpose is to improve and increase: (1) the quality of human resource development, including the preparation of students to work in the global economy, (2) North American student mobility, (3) partnerships among institutions of higher education in Canada, the U.S. and Mexico, and (4) trilateral exchange of knowledge and expertise in higher education and training (International Academic Mobility Program, 2005). Established in 1995, after ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement, NAMHE thus encourages student mobility and co-operation and collaboration in higher education, research and training. Since its inception, HRSDC has approved more than fifty projects, with subjects ranging from urban conservation, agriculture and tourism management, to mental health, social welfare, and public health education (International Academic Mobility Program, 2005). Each project includes at

least six partner universities, two from each country, and aims to encourage a student-centered North American dimension to education and training.

The North American Conflict Resolution Program commenced in September 2003, with an anticipated four years of funding. The lead universities of Manitoba, Louisville, and Colima managed and administered the project and reported to each funding agency. Aimed at upper level undergraduates, the NACRP successfully mobilized fifty-five students, from a range of academic disciplines, with each student spending one semester abroad at a partner institution. Furthermore, faculty members networked and traveled to one another's campuses for site visits, lectures and classroom demonstrations, and visiting positions. One University of Louisville professor was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to teach political science at the Universidad de Colima, while another Louisville professor spent a semester teaching negotiation, in Spanish, via active-learning methods to Colima students of law and politics. On various occasions faculty shared syllabi, teaching ideas, and reading lists, and presented their research to one another. Numerous faculty associates attended the "Conflict Resolution in the Americas" Conference at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in April 2006.

Prior to the commencement of the program, the lead institutions drafted, gained the approval of legal counsel and other authorities and the signature of each university president, to a detailed Memorandum of Understanding that laid out common expectations and responsibilities. One important aspect involved the portability of credits from one university to another, something complicated, in general, by differences in the three university systems, and, more specifically by varying conceptions of matters ranging from credit hours to number of courses constituting a full academic load. Among the problems encountered were students who did not receive as many credits in their study abroad as they would have at their home institution, students who registered for classes too late and found particular offerings closed, and students not able to take particular courses necessary for their majors or their degrees. The focus on student mobility, however, is leading many universities toward more liberal credit recognition policies – a development of significant value in the global marketplace and in an age of migration.

The universities committed to prepare students prior to their travel by ensuring that they had a fundamental grounding in conflict resolution, requisite language ability, and appropriate cultural knowledge. While abroad, participants enrolled in one required course, two electives and an internship, with an emphasis on conflict resolution. Four principal themes, reflective of the signature areas of the participating universities, helped to bring intellectual

coherence to the project: conflict as related to the family and community, business, the environment, and foreign policy.

In examining North American conflict and conflict resolution, the participants had to contend with a number of challenging difficulties. For instance, quite apart from skills and training, one's language, experiences and worldview all influence how one perceives and reacts to conflict (Avruch, 1998), as do issues of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. The NACRP enabled students to explore the differing attitudes, assumptions, values, and approaches that characterize conflict resolution within the different North American contexts and to postulate ways to deal effectively with cultural differences (Fowler, Byrne, and Senehi, 2002).

A critically important dimension of the program was the directed internship. Each host university placed visiting students in an organization engaged in actively responding to intra- or inter-cultural conflict. To ensure the work experience was as rewarding as possible, a faculty member was assigned to each student in order to provide oversight, counsel, and academic structure. Thus, in addition to the required 200 hours of work at the internship site, students met regularly with their faculty advisor and program coordinator, maintained a journal that detailed their experiences, and wrote a research paper that analyzed their internship work. The participants thus had faculty assistance not only in solving occasional problems, but in reflecting on related issues, topics, and experiences. To ensure maximum effort and rigor, the internship was graded for academic credit. The Directors of the Mauro Centre developed a practicum handbook, a practicum site evaluation form, a practicum student evaluation form, and a log of practicum hours form that was used by the partner universities (Byrne and Senehi, 2004; North American Student Mobility Grant, 2004).

The chief goal of the practicum was for students to gain practical, hands-on experiences and insights as they interacted with the community outside of the university and participated in processes of conflict analysis and resolution. Students could collaborate with outside professionals in observing and conducting conflict interventions and in altering existing programs or designing new ones, including courses, workshops, training seminars, and dispute systems analysis and design. Practicum sites included a wide range of public and private, governmental and non-governmental organizations, such as legislatures, mediation centers, peace and justice organizations, social service and law enforcement agencies, schools, courts, and hospitals.

Each practicum site accepted student interns for its own constellation of reasons. Some sought to multiply links to the university involved. Others were eager to take advantage of the participants' skills, such as native

fluency in a foreign language or developing conflict resolution abilities. Some were proud to help to shape the next generation of professionals in the CAR field (Byrne and Senehi, 2004). The synergistic relationship among student, university, and practicum site was critically important to successful field experiences (Byrne and Senehi, 2004). The practicum component also allowed each university to further their community missions, developing and cementing positive relations beyond the campus.

To strengthen the linkages between the universities and to allow student participants to communicate with each other, the Consortium developed a listserv and a website that featured introductions to the campuses, to course material, and to participating faculty members and that provided an overview of some of the sites available for internships (see [www.uwm.edu/Dept/CIE/FIPSE](http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/CIE/FIPSE)). While the NACRP website and listserv proved invaluable to the participants, the better use of technology in administering and evaluating exchange programs requires further investigation. Innovative possibilities certainly exist in linking technology with exchange projects, as well as CAR, and peace studies, especially given the transnational nature of both.

Through all these means, the project worked toward developing understanding of the causes of North American conflict, while seeking to provide students with the opportunity to explore peacebuilding initiatives (Fowler, Byrne and Senehi, 2002). This singular cooperative endeavor among North American peoples, universities and governments, focused on inspiring a mutually beneficial cross-cultural search for better answers to North American problems.

### **Evaluation of the North American Conflict Resolution Program**

The Program was evaluated in different ways, as directed by the funding agencies in each country. In the United States, outside evaluator Susan Allen Nan of the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University prepared a multi-method, utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 1997) that included a formative evaluation after the first year, monitoring throughout the grant, and a final summative evaluation. Her pre-exchange and post-exchange surveys covered students from all three countries and all six universities, and included as well interviews of project directors and other faculty and examination of project materials.

Similarly, in Canada, to highlight successes and identify areas for improvement, project administrators surveyed participating students from the University of Manitoba and the University of Montreal. Each year,

evaluations were distributed to students upon their return home to Canada after the completion of their exchange experience. Thus, as a whole, they reflect key aspects of the evolution of the project over time. Additionally, the opinions and insights of visiting students from the Mexican and U.S. universities to the University of Manitoba were explored by reviewing their evaluations of their internships.

The University of Manitoba also assessed feedback from faculty members and the evaluations of each student's performance by the on-site practicum supervisors. Furthermore, project administrators periodically reviewed the proposal and initial timelines to ensure objectives regarding curriculum development, student mobility, and the transfer of knowledge were being met.

### *Outside Evaluator's Conclusions*

In her final summative evaluation Susan Allen Nan reported: "This evaluation concludes that the North American Conflict Resolution Program Exchange was a highly successful program that positively impacted the study of many undergraduates who learned conflict resolution as well as North American cultures and languages" (Nan, 2008). She went on to note: participant responses indicate that their experiences were exceptional and that the impact of the program went much further than the individual students who traveled to other universities. Whole university courses and communities were enriched by the program. So, the program positively impacted hundreds more students than the individuals who traveled through the program. (Nan, 2008)

After noting that over 90 percent of the participants surveyed reported that they were "very satisfied" with their exchange experiences, Dr. Nan concluded: "Most students identified minor ... detail[s] of the exchange experience that were not ideal, such as one course being full and not available for enrollment, or an initial dormitory arrangement being unsatisfactory, or an internship experience which did not carry significant responsibility ... These ... details were ... presented as indeed minor in the context of an overall experience described by many as 'life changing' and 'outstanding' and 'the best ever'" (Nan, 2008). All but two of the student respondents reported that participating in the program had "very much" or "substantially" increased their knowledge of conflict resolution. All students who had to call upon foreign language training reported substantial language improvement, and all the participants declared "very significant" their participation in relevant social and cultural activities.

The outside evaluator found that NACRP students had very different internship experiences, with some of the participating universities doing a markedly better job than others in finding practicum sites that would provide a valuable learning experience. Dr. Nan (2008) wrote: “Some students loved their internships and listed these as areas of significant learning, and some had mixed feelings about internships that were both rewarding and frustrating”. The most negative comment came from a student who had traveled to Mexico and later wrote: “My goals were to have an internship, interesting and serious, in an organization or an institution where I would have learned and grown ... I wanted to be surrounded by people who treated me seriously and were respectful of what I did. I did not find any of those things during my stay” (Nan, 2008).

Balanced against this, however, were the many positive comments about the value of internships to the exchange experience, as illustrated by the following three extracts from evaluations administered by the University of Manitoba. A woman from Manitoba, who carried out a practicum at a Mexican local government department, wrote:

Having an internship was probably the most valuable part of my exchange. This is where I met the most people, learnt the most, and strengthened my Spanish skills the most. I was able to understand more about why Mexico is the way it is, and why, and how it handles a variety of situations including international relations. It was there, at my internship, that I became aware of the reality that so many people continue to battle for their essential basic rights.

A U.S. student who traveled to Canada and completed his practicum with a non-governmental mediation organization in Winnipeg, Manitoba commented as follows:

I came to Canada to improve my understanding of conflict resolution and mediation, to learn from a foreign social infrastructure alternative to the U.S., and to make real contributions to resolving conflicts in the world today. My practicum allowed me to accomplish each goal in some facet. It helped me understand the many components and concepts that embody conflict resolution. It helped me realize that conflict is a normal part of life. While many people see conflict as negative and feel ill-equipped to deal with it, a greater understanding of conflict resolution increases our ability to respond effectively. In fact, conflicts would not do the damage they do if they people involved applied conflict resolution skills early on ... If I keep an open mind and employ all the skills and techniques that I have learned, then together we can make a contribution of some sort to peace.

A University of Manitoba student who completed her internship at a U.S. NGO observed: “There are many circumstances in the North American

paradigm where the conflicts experienced at the organization were reflective of parallel conflicts in both Mexico and Canada ... Thus, this internship served to offer new ways to look at and deal with a major issue that North Americans hold in common". A student from Manitoba who completed his practicum with another U.S. NGO later commented:

The internship has also reminded me that my success in work and in life will not be judged based on the amount of money I make or the amount of people I surpass, but rather it will be on the effectiveness of and results derived from the organization I am part of, the quality of work I produce and the amount of people stating my name when asked to recommend a person of integrity and ethical professionalism ... It has reaffirmed my determination to pursue a career in anything international in scope and nature. Whether it be public or private, the need to teach people more constructive and productive ways of interaction in a shrinking world is imperative.

Thus, for some students the internship was clearly one of the most rewarding and thought-provoking aspects of the program.

Finally, on the institutional level Dr. Nan (2008) observed: "While the program was structured as an agreement amongst six universities, it was the people who really made it happen, with particular professors being noted repeatedly in the student evaluations". She concluded:

University of Louisville, University of Manitoba, and Universidad de Colima ... [t]hese lead institutions appear to have been more actively involved in the exchange program. They had more developed conflict resolution programs. Their faculty were cited as outstanding by students in surveys. These institutions voluntarily participated actively in the program evaluation process, even providing their own separately collected relevant data when requested by the evaluator. (Nan, 2008)

### *Impact on Particular Students*

The voices of the students who participated in the North American Conflict Resolution Program are quite revealing of its rippling consequences. Students ranged in age from eighteen to thirty, and came from a wide variety of academic disciplines including political studies, economics, Spanish, law, psychology, social work and science. Many of these were first exposed to the CAR field through their preparation for and participation in the NACRP.

One key theme that emerged from student evaluations was the project's impact on personal development. The participants reported that their maturity and self-confidence had been enhanced and that they could better define their goals. Students also cited the cultural immersion experience, including the

different learning processes, as excellent preparation for challenging situations they may face in their developing careers. The NACRP clearly helped students to define their goals, personally and professionally. After studies in Mexico a student from Manitoba wrote, “this experience certainly gave me greater focus in my studies. I believe that I know better now what I want in my university career and will work harder for it”.

While this feature of the exchange arose in various student responses, another representative comment came from a Manitoba student who completed her exchange in Mexico: “Not only did I have the opportunity to learn about a nation which to Canada has, and will become increasingly important, but I also learned a lot about myself, which included my goals and interests. This exchange has equipped me with work experience that will strengthen my abilities and chances towards my chosen career path”. Another student from Manitoba who traveled to the U.S. later wrote:

This experience definitely opened up new possibilities for me in fields I had not previously considered prior to going on this exchange. The idea and field of international peacebuilding is an emerging field and practice, and one that I feel links together my passion for international studies and the desire to affect the world in a positive manner. What makes this field even more unique is that everyone – engineers, architects, soldiers, business executives etc. – can all be part of it. It complements nicely the skills one already possesses.

In fact, reflective of their experiences abroad and new understanding, a number of Canadian, Mexican and U.S. students who participated in the NACRP program are now pursuing graduate programs in the CAR field. One University of Louisville student who had traveled to Mexico on the exchange was later awarded a Fulbright scholarship to teach conflict resolution theatre in Spanish to students in a village in the Dominican Republic. Another went on to win a Rotary Peace Scholarship to study conflict resolution in Ireland, and then was awarded a Fulbright to study one aspect of the conflict in Sri Lanka. He went on to enter a U.S. Ph.D. program in conflict resolution. Still others highlighted their exchange program experiences in successful applications to leading graduate programs in law, business, and divinity. And, many stayed in touch with professors, recounting their use of conflict resolution skills and knowledge and reporting to Dr. Nan “additional significant contact with professors, internship supervisors, or other students” since returning home (Nan, 2008).

When students were asked to select a skill or some knowledge that they acquired from their experience of living and studying in another country, ten of the thirteen respondents questioned by the University of Manitoba answered “self-confidence” as well as “intercultural understanding”. One woman traveled to Manitoba from the U.S. and termed her experience a

“journey of growth”, while a Manitoba student who spent her semester in the U.S. observed that the experience “helped me gain independence”. A Mexican student also noted that she matured while spending her semester at Manitoba: I grew up in this country as never before in my life. The information is brought to our hands in multiple ways; it is time to act. Human beings are being destroyed by us, by our lack of values and our fear to do something. We have to realize that our life is worthy and priceless. We have to open our eyes – I have opened mine. I am going to return to Mexico and I will make a change, because what is the theory for, if we don’t have the passion of the practice?

Many of the participants valued the singular opportunity they had enjoyed to study conflict resolution from the perspective of a university partner in a different North American country. Representative of these comments were those made by a Manitoba student who traveled to the U.S. and later wrote: “I also found it valuable to be exposed to American points of view during the programs. It is easy to fall into a certain way of viewing things and exposure to alternative opinions is important in order to gain a better understanding of current issues”.

Beyond these points, through participating in this innovative transnational conflict resolution program, students were able to interact across cultures and make friends with people they would otherwise never have known. The exchange project provided participants with an unparalleled opportunity to develop cross-cultural friendships and improve inter-cultural understanding. This was viewed as an important benefit of the program, with every student surveyed by the University of Manitoba commenting on the topic. For certain students this feature of the program may prove to be among its most important and lasting benefits. Through friendships, one learns about other societies, their conflicts and cultures, perspectives and conflict resolution methods, at much deeper and richer levels than is often possible from classroom experiences alone. Further, if citizens of North America are to be developed, networks of people must be developed across our boundaries, and thus being comfortable engaging people of the continent, whatever their nationality, is of paramount importance.

It is thus interesting that so many of the participants underscored the friendships made during the Program. One student from the University of Louisville traveled to Canada and later reflected: “it’s funny how being here for a few months, has helped me create the friendships of a lifetime”. This sentiment was echoed throughout the responses to the University of Manitoba surveys, with one Canadian participant noting that encountering people from different backgrounds while in Mexico helped him to “broaden his horizons”. He continued: “Meeting so many people, of so many different cultures, has

simply highlighted, underlined and capitalized just how similar and how different humans can be – no matter where you are from”. One woman from Manitoba, who traveled to the U.S., noted that she had been able to maintain friendships developed while on the exchange and that her personal life had been enriched via these friendships. She went on to say: “One of the most important benefits from my exchange is the amount I learnt from meeting so many new people, people who may be different from the type of person I would have normally gotten to know in Canada. It really showed me a lot about how to deal with kinds of people that I wasn’t necessarily used to, and to have much more patience and understanding”.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Much remains to be done to promote cooperative university efforts to coordinate and develop the study and practice of CAR. Too few of our educational institutions in our respective countries are cooperating across national boundaries to exchange ideas and learn from one another, much less to reach a shared understanding of problems, or to formulate common North American strategies for resolving them. The qualitative data presented above illustrates the importance of exchange programs to the personal and professional development of students, to the faculties, the learning environment, and the internationalization policies of universities, and to the CAR field generally. Although the information we have related is based on a single exchange project, we believe that it is broadly indicative of student mobility projects in general, and we hope that it encourages other universities in our region and other regions to undertake their own mobilization projects in the conflict resolution and other fields of academic inquiry.

The value of the cultural immersion experience cannot be underestimated in today’s global village (Fry, 2006), where many issues are no longer confined within state borders and students in a wide variety of fields must have strong CAR skills. Not only does it clearly benefit students academically and personally, but it can be crucial for their developing careers. Students who have lived in other countries are more attractive candidates for a number of professions since their experiences demonstrate essential skills in today’s competitive job marketplace – adaptability, flexibility, language skills, knowledge of diversity, coping skills and sensitivity to other cultures (International Academic Mobility Program, 2005). Moreover, the development and honing of cross-cultural peacemaking skills critical to a person’s employability are exceedingly positive outcomes of such an exchange program. The job market, whether domestic or international, places a premium on searching out new employees who are flexible, capable of

adapting to change, who are bilingual and even multi-lingual, and who possess skills in team work, negotiation, problem solving, and cultural understanding. The academic experience of participating in a study abroad program focused on conflict resolution, paired with the cultural experience of living and working abroad, promoted the development of all of these skills.

Signal advances occurred at the institutional level as well. After much discussion and consultation among the partner institutions, various universities created courses, improving and adjusting their curricula to better promote and better explore the CAR field. The North American lens through which this conflict resolution program proceeded, paired with the support and input of faculty at partner institutions, brought certain faculty members to incorporate new emphases in their teaching: new readings, new case studies, and new pedagogies. Beyond this, the presence on campus, and especially in the classroom, of talented and motivated foreign students, intent on learning about conflict resolution, had extraordinarily positive repercussions for all the universities. This was commented on by faculty members and by participants preparing to travel abroad, and it affected positively countless other students, not otherwise involved in the program. Much the same could be said of the broader communities in which these students became engaged, especially in their practicum experiences. The organizations involved both gave to the student participants and received from them: benefits flowing reciprocally from the international students, with their fresh ideas, infectious enthusiasm, and different worldviews, to conflict resolution organizations, and vice versa.

Instituting a transnational exchange program also proved to be a valuable way to draw talented students into the study and practice of conflict resolution. In many cases students from other disciplines were attracted to this innovative and challenging program, and through their participation were made aware of the importance of CAR in complementing their skills and field of study. Students who participated in the NACRP clearly enriched their understanding of conflict and conflict resolution within North America, while gaining different, in-depth perspectives from studying the subject at foreign universities.

While we have not attempted to quantify the academic benefit of the program *per se*, students' perceptions of improvements in their academic ability through learning and working in another country are perhaps even more important than such measurable variables as increased knowledge of current events. Participants were exposed to new perspectives in the field and to broader but related disciplines. The program was a transforming experience in the sense that some students wanted to move on to conflict resolution, academically and professionally, after their participation.

Our findings strongly suggest that the effects of the exchange experience on students in terms of self-confidence, maturity, independence and sensitivity to other cultures were quite significant, though not easily quantified. Rich interaction with other cultures is important not only to one's personal growth and employability, but also to the prospects of building peace and social justice across North America. By providing for the immersion of students in another culture, the NACRP contributed to the preparation of future generations of leaders with useful backgrounds and skill sets and with heightened sensitivity to issues of social justice and a better understanding of cross-cultural issues. The graduates of this program, we trust, will be among those who will more easily dismiss the negative stereotypes that often play a role in the perpetuation of conflicts, whether they are personal, community- or nationally-based.

In the twenty-first century, North America's premier universities will be places not only for the contemplative research and study of regional concerns, but also for the design of solutions to intractable and far-reaching environmental, social, political and economic problems. For the six university partners of the North American Consortium for a Culture of Peace, the North American Conflict Resolution Program combined the academic elements of rigorous scholarship and innovative teaching, with the service elements of civic engagement and practical problem solving. It promoted deeper involvement by the academic community in encouraging more peaceful and prosperous multicultural societies. It also added a new dimension to our university programs – a vibrant intersection of cross-cultural thought and collective action among our campuses.

The participants, students and faculty alike, have contributed markedly to university life at home and abroad, combining their enthusiasm for this innovative opportunity, with their varied experiences in different cultures to further the learning process and to enrich and diversify the academic experience. In this way, the NACR program has promoted a new generation of North Americans who affirm a shared culture of peace and who strive to live in a common global space, assisting each other to transform conflicts pragmatically and nonviolently.

### *Acknowledgements*

We are particularly grateful to the Human Resources and Skills Development Canada and the FIPSE program of the U.S. Department of Education, which each provided four-year grants to support the NACRP. We also wish to thank Julie Chychota and Gayle Roncin for reading an earlier draft of this paper.

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