Experiential Learning Course Immeres Students in US-Mexico Immigration Issues

by Kaley Anderson, First-Year IIC Graduate Student

Summer interterm 2014 marked the second year that Media, Film & Journalism Studies (MFJS) Professor Margie Thompson has led a class to Tucson, Arizona for an experiential learning course on the US-Mexico border.

The week-long course, Border Cultures, Communication, and Immigration, allows students the opportunity to learn firsthand about border issues by visiting a detention center, deportation hearings, migrant trails through the desert, and organizations that have formed to deal with these issues.

Most importantly, the immersive learning experience goes beyond reading books and holding conversations about immigration in a university classroom; rather, student participants are allowed access to the epicenter of immigration issues at present.

The course is carried out in partnership with BorderLinks, a nonprofit organization in Tucson that focuses on social justice, relationship building, and immigration in the border region. During the course of the week, Professor Thompson, along with co-instructor Marí Suárez Toro, led students to various immigration sites in the region.

Chelsea Montes de Oca, International and Intercultural Communication (IIC) graduate student, remarked that the most striking moments for her were visiting the border wall and Central Arizona Detention Center.
“You hear about it, but when you’re actually in front of it, [you realize that] it’s close to houses. You drive through a neighborhood and you hit the wall. It essentially separates a neighborhood,” said Montes de Oca.

At the detention center, Montes de Oca and classmates met and spoke with a detainee from Peru who had fled his country because he was persecuted for being homosexual. “You can hear about it in class, but it feels a lot different when you’re there seeing it. There are times when you’re just watching things happen and you’re trying to take everything in for yourself,” she said.

Speaking to a border patrol officer, visiting a church that provides sanctuary to immigrants, and visiting a group that advocates for students who are admitted to college yet struggle to obtain scholarships or financial aid, all allow students to connect faces with immigration issues. These issues become more than facts; they become about the stories behind them.

Interested in taking the course this summer interterm? Email MFJS@du.edu.