International Exchanges Prepare Montana Youth for a Global Future

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Twenty five years ago Senator Mike Mansfield said, “We are living in a fast changing world. You are living in a world that is shrinking, the globe is becoming a neighborhood. It’s going to shrink further still. We’re going to become closer neighbors still. We are going to have to understand each other better.”

Around the time Mansfield said this, Iran’s leadership had announced a fatwa calling for the death of Salman Rushdie for The Satanic Verses. The first global positioning system satellites were placed into orbit. The Exxon Valdez spilled 240,000 barrels of oil into Alaska’s Prince William Sound. Hungary put the first dent in the iron curtain, removing 150 miles of barbed wire fencing along the border with Austria. Chinese university students protested in Tiananmen Square. And Motorola introduced the world’s smallest mobile phone.

And what does an even more connected world bring us in 2014? Russia annexes Crimea. The West Africa Ebola outbreak. A Sunni militant group known as ISIS begins an offensive in northern Iraq to oust the Shiite government. Germany wins the world cup. Two top Khmer Rouge leaders are found guilty of crimes against humanity. And Apple releases its largest mobile phone ever.

What happens around the world matters – and it matters to Montana. When Mansfield wrote those words, he wanted American youth to rise to the challenges – and benefits – of living in a globalized community.
An international education plays a key part in preparing our young leaders. Evidence shows that young people who participate in international exchange have greater knowledge and awareness of other cultures. More than that, they acquire advanced skills in communication, problem-solving, achieve a greater sense of purpose, and become stronger critical thinkers. Research also suggests that youth who participate in international education are more inclined to attend college and identify career goals earlier than their peers.

I have been fortunate to witness the impact of international education on Montana youth by leading the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center’s American Youth Leadership Program, known as AYLP, which is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. In 2013 and 2014, I led two groups of 20 Montana high school students and two high school teachers to Cambodia to study environmental issues. The month I spent with each group is unforgettable. Unforgettable, because yes, there was a leech ambush in the jungle, the humidity is over 90%, and teenagers are faced with having to learn to bathe with a bucket— but the real eye-opening experiences for these young people run much deeper.

One student named Charlotte reflected on her experience in Cambodia last summer, saying: “Seeing firsthand the struggles, the landscape, the work, the poverty, the behavior, and the culture of Cambodians provides insight into the lifestyles of much of the world’s population. It helps us better understand the world we are growing up in and the struggles we will face and the problems we will have to solve. In an increasingly globalized world, that kind of education is most important.”

Each person in the AYLP Cambodia program was affected in a personal way. However, based on two years of this program, participants have cited similar changes noted in the research about impacts of international exchanges on youth. Our participants said they have greater motivation to perform
community service and help others; they are more open-minded; they have an increased interest in international affairs and travel; they are more appreciative for what they have at home and as U.S. citizens; they feel greater self-awareness and confidence; they are more confident in public speaking and are better equipped to work as a team; they are more independent and able to solve problems; and most say they are more prepared to leave for college.

These are significant changes. These are 40 of Montana’s future leaders more prepared - and eager - to take on challenges locally and internationally.

This is why I am grateful that the Mansfield Center has been given the opportunity by the U.S. Department of State to extend this opportunity to more Montanans. We are honored to announce that we are currently recruiting 20 Montana high school students and two Montana educators to travel on an all-expense paid program to Thailand in 2015. Participants will engage with their Thai peers in learning about food security and climate change, while developing leadership skills and conducting community service. We are actively seeking people from all backgrounds and abilities to apply. After all, it’s not just an exchange with Thai, but with one another.

For more information, please visit www.umt.edu/mansfield.

For the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center, I’m Kelsey Stamm.