Shaping Global Opinions by Sharing Montana with the World

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Prior to winning the Nobel Prize for Literature, John Steinbeck decided he was out of touch with America. He took his French poodle Charley on a cross-country road trip, documenting his adventures in his book, Travels with Charley in Search of America. Steinbeck wrote rapturously of Montana, saying, “…I am in love with Montana. For other states I have admiration, respect, recognition, even some affection, but with Montana it is love….Montana has a spell on me. It is grandeur and warmth….Of all the states, it is my favorite, and my love….”

Of course, for all of us who live here, such depth of emotion comes as no surprise. Every day, as we wake up to the mountains and enjoy the companionship of our neighbors, we know how lucky we are to be here. And when foreigners imagine America, visions of our Big Sky country inevitably come to mind. The American West is integral in defining our national character. Montana exemplifies our adventure, independence, and egalitarian spirit.

The U.S. Department of State has recognized what we have to offer as a state. Over the past five years, the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center of the University of Montana has successfully competed for numerous grants from the U.S. Department of State’s Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau, designed to promote mutual understanding, leadership, and professional development. Importantly for listeners tonight, these federally-funded grants have touched communities around our state. High
school and university students, teachers, economic development professionals, sports educators, and community leaders have had the opportunity to travel overseas on these educational exchanges. Countless other citizens have hosted international visitors in their homes, offices, and communities.

Most recently, the Mansfield Center has been awarded a grant to host 20 high school teachers from around the world. The program is called the Study of the U.S. Institute: American Studies Through the Lens of Democracy and Citizenship. Today, 20 teachers of English and American Studies arrive to spend a month in Montana, visiting from such countries as Iraq and Afghanistan; Uganda and Cote d’Ivoire; Mongolia and China; Finland and Lithuania; and Panama and Paraguay. Each scholar will come with individual perceptions of the U.S. shaped by such influences as the media and their own advanced studies.

The Institute provides an introduction to American government and politics to create a strong foundation for understanding U.S. culture and society. We examine the ideas that informed the creation and development of America’s political system, how that system has developed over time, and consider some of the major contemporary challenges facing American democracy and its national institutions. Our program emphasizes the importance of thinking critically across disciplines, and to debate difficult questions in seeking to define American culture and society.

However, it’s the people-to-people engagement that will define the scholars’ perceptions of America. We hope you’ll see them around over the next month, as their program takes them into local schools, government offices, and businesses; to Downtown Tonight and Saturday markets; up to the M and rafting the Clark Fork; and dining and shopping on the local economy. It’s engagement with people like you that will make the biggest impact on what they think of the United States. And if what we’ve seen with our other visitors holds true, they’ll leave Missoula knowing that Montanans are kind, generous, and warm people. It’s because of people like you that we’ve been so successful in attracting global projects to our state. And for that, we’re grateful to you.
We are honored to bring such projects to Montana in the spirit of our namesake, Senator Mike Mansfield. Rising from working Butte copper mines and service in three military branches to lead the U.S. Senate and serve as our nation’s ambassador to Japan, Mansfield left enduring marks on Montana, the U.S., and international diplomacy, and was respected for his wisdom, integrity, and leadership. While his primary regional focus was Asia, Mansfield valued global understanding. As a result, our programs are international in scope, with a strong emphasis on integrating cultural context. As we lead secondary educators in a study of the U.S., Mansfield serves as an apt reminder of the virtues and attributes of our society and culture.

One of our visitors from Vietnam commented last week, “...I have discovered the corners of the real U.S with fresh eyes and mind. Living in Montana makes me feel about the world two opposite things: it is very huge and diverse in terms of geography, but very touching in human emotion.”

Thank you for sharing of yourselves and your community with international visitors, impacting global perceptions one person at a time.

On behalf of the Mansfield Center, I’m Deena Mansour.