

# An Overview of Title VI's Impact on an HBCU in Appalachia: Strengthening Intercultural Competency at West Virginia State University

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## **A Brief History (1890's)**

West Virginia State University (WVSU) a Historical Black College and University (HBCU) founded in 1891 as a land-grant institution of learning is located in the State's center of government, industry, business, and serves as a major resource center for this metropolitan area. The university was known up until the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as West Virginia State College but in 2004 it gained university status when it began offering graduate degrees in Biotechnology and Media Studies. Currently the University offers comprehensive and distinguished baccalaureate degree programs in business, liberal arts, professional studies, sciences, and social sciences and graduate degree programs in liberal arts, professional studies, natural sciences, and social science.

The school often referred to as "State" or "West Virginia State," was established as a land-grant institution for black students in the 17 states that had segregated schools. The noted African American educator and statesman Booker T. Washington visited the campus often and spoke at its first commencement exercise. The College at that time, attained national prominence as an institution of higher education for blacks and continues to serve as a center of black culture not only for the capitol city of Charleston but for the state. Voluntary desegregation in 1954 created a distinctive character that inspired the motto "A Living Laboratory of Human Relations." It has the most racially and culturally diverse student body, faculty, and staff among institutions of higher education in the state of West Virginia.

### **Title VI Funded Project & Evaluation (1999)**

West Virginia State University has welcomed international students, taught international courses, and employed international faculty for over a century. These efforts however intensified with the granting of funding from the U.S. Department of Education's (DOE) Title VI Undergraduate International Studies and Foreign Language Program (UISFL). The UISFL funded project titled "Strengthening International Studies at an Historically Black in Appalachia," opened an Office of International Affairs with a full-time Director and began institutionalizing a program at WVSU. It allowed eight selected faculty members to study the French language, the culture and economy of the Republic of Benin, West Africa and to develop new courses and units in previous courses reflecting a global perspective leading to a Minor in International Studies. It also initiated a partnership with the National University of Benin. A follow-up private grant linked the libraries of the two institutions involving an exchange of librarians on a rotating basis for three years resulting in the opening of the Benin Room, a special collection of that government's documents, literature, and artifacts.

The major challenge for WVSU was and continues to be the development of study abroad courses that are accessible to the particular type of students enrolled at the institution. The population is older than most schools, many married and/or with children and the great majority working either part-time (36%), or full time (37%) and minority students (17 %). Many students do not have financial resources to afford travel at all, but just as many students cannot take time off from their work or their parental obligations. As a result, on-campus work with short-term and low-cost study abroad has prevailed (Natsis, et. al, 1999).

The Consultant who returned at the end of the second year (2001) to evaluate the program listed the following observations in a Final Report to the Undergraduate International Studies and Foreign Language Program Director:

... Particularly striking during this second visit for me was the clearly transformative effect which the project has already had on a significant group of faculty and consequently on the [college] (sic) itself. ... [T]he number of course offerings which deal with Africa has doubled as a result of the Title VI project and the awareness of Benin specifically is very high [...]. I was struck by how effectively [WVSC] (sic) has used what might seem at first glance a rather limited focus, on one of the smallest countries in Africa. This success points to the value of specificity and of developing an integrated, broad range approach, rather than attempting to 'cover the continent' or to work in a country, Nigeria being a most clear example, which is overwhelming in its complexity and structural problems.

The focus on Benin was not limited to contacts between ... [the two universities]. It was, wisely, expanded to include business and government on both sides of the partnership, with [a visit by]the Ambassador of Benin ... which involved the community of the city of Charleston, and with the office of the Senator of West Virginia involved in the kick-off of the project.

Another essential aspect of the focus on Benin was faculty development which, again unlike many other Title VI projects, involved the faculty not only in learning about the culture, history, politics and economy of Benin, but also in intensive study of French. It is all too rare that faculty members have the motivation and the opportunity to either develop or begin knowledge of a foreign language.

Finally, I would like to stress another outcome of this project. [...] the creation of an International Studies minor, the addition of a significant number of revised and new courses with a focus on Sub-Saharan Africa, and the augmentation of language offering in the direction of a Francophone, rather than a merely French focus were very important.... [T]he creation of the Office of International Affairs and the hiring of its first director, ... In this Office the institution gains a structural basis for future development of international programs of a great variety, as well as an anchor for assuring that these programs are coordinated in a meaningful way, thus able to serve the College as a whole. At institutions of higher education in the USA one finds a great many instances of a highly fragmented approach to internationalization, with a variety of programs and activities originating in different departments, schools and units, and with the result that much effort and many resources are not used efficiently because there is poor communication and little coordination between these programs. With the creation of the Office of International Affairs, [WVSC] (sic) is in a position to make certain that this wasteful approach is not reproduced on its campus.

As a result of my many years of multiple experiences of directing Title VI projects at my own university, and of consulting and evaluating them at a number of institutions, I have come to view the grants as functioning in two ways: directly, in funding specifically the proposed activities, and indirectly, in supporting a variety of steps in the process of comprehensive and integrated internationalization of the institution. That latter function is as important as the first, and it is in this latter function that the consultant can play a particularly useful role by pointing to the ways in which the specific project can lead to a greater, more holistic approach to continued institutional change, change which has lasting effects (Gabara, 2001 pp 2-4)

### **The Present State of “State” (2014)**

The above observations were made nearly 15 years ago. Today a Bachelor of Arts in International Studies is offered at the university with six program concentration options: International Business, Spanish, French, Africana Studies, Communications and International Relations. In academic year (2012-13) there were five short term study abroad trips to China, Nigeria, Mexico, Kenya and United Arab Emirate conducted by WVSU professors and a university travel abroad partnership with two other WV universities to Canada’s Federal Capital Region of Quebec and Ottawa bringing total trips abroad available to “State” students to seven.

The College of Natural Science’s Graduate program in Biotechnology continues its research/faculty and student exchanges in England, Mexico, and Brazil. This program began shortly after the university began implementing its Title VI program in Benin.

The College of Arts & Sciences’ Communication/Media Studies programs also conduct research and continues to develop programs abroad with the goal of increasing intercultural dialogue and intercultural competence for its students through cooperative digital filmmaking. These activities have been conducted in Tanzania, Russia, Czech Republic and most recently the United Arab Emirate.

In spring 2013 undergraduate and graduate students as well as faculty members from the University of Sharjah just outside Dubai City, and WVSU collaborated on a “narrative travelogue” film based on a Tim Robbins tale titled “Life inside a Woodpecker.” The resulting relationship developed between the two institutions increased intercultural competence among students as well as faculty by increasing intercultural dialogue through work on the film project. Competency continues as one of the missions for the Appalachian school’s Communication/Media Studies Department because it is understood that the success of the latter (dialogue) often depends on the level of intercultural competence of the persons involved. Regardless of the specific outcome of the dialogue, competent intercultural communicators arguably benefit from the process of dialogue itself because of the ability to learn from the experience and to empathize with the other’s point of view (Arasaratnam, 2014). When Appalachian and Middle Eastern cultures engage in activities requiring technical skills and creativity, appropriate behavior in interactions is crucial to accomplishing the end-goal.

In “*#Camel*,” the short film developed by the two universities, three teens test their intercultural competence when they are transported from a West Virginia barn and horse stable to the Desert of Dubai with the help of a smart phone and a pack of Camel cigarettes. Their exploits allow them to discover and experience Middle Eastern culture on their own at first, which they navigate rather successfully. Once however, the young girl exchanges her cowgirl hat for Dirham’s (UAE money) in the market place they meet new friends who escort them to multiple sightseeing and recreational areas where they engage in exhausting activities. Throughout the day the concept of intercultural communication competence is demonstrated through their ability to empathize, to listen actively, maintain positive attitude toward each other and the culture while demonstrating flexibility, and a willingness to learn from their experiences.

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Upon returning to the US faculty members and students engage in editing the footage and began search for a music that would reflect the mood, rhythm and sound of the two distinct countries. One of the teen actor-musicians that appeared in the travelogue suggested a former teacher be contacted at his alma mater, an elementary school located in Washington, DC and one of that city's most ethnically diverse. Doing so resulted in the students of the E. L. Haynes Public Charter School's Marimba Band scoring and performing the "*#Camel*" sound track under the direction of their music teacher from Mumbai, India. Planned screenings will occur in WV and DC in May and in the UAE in June 2014.

The future for the partnering institutions to strengthen their intercultural ties looks bright as they continue dialogic interaction in planning a Global Health and Fitness Conference for 2015 focusing on a major public health problem they both share: obesity! West Virginia is the third most obese state in the nation and as reported by *Gulf News* the United Arab Emirate ranks as the fifth fattest nation in the world according to a 2012 study published by a BioMed Central (BMC) Public Health Journal. Senior Reporter for the *News* Mamood Saberi state that research scientists stated in the Journal that the number of obese people in the world will affect the world's resources and cause a major threat to food security. "Tackling population fatness may be critical to world food security and ecological sustainability," the report concluded.

This collaboration sets the course for strengthening cultural competence through research and faculty/student exchanges as they develop together a Health Communication track in Sharjah U.'s Department of Mass Communication and WVSU's Department of Communication/Media Studies.

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