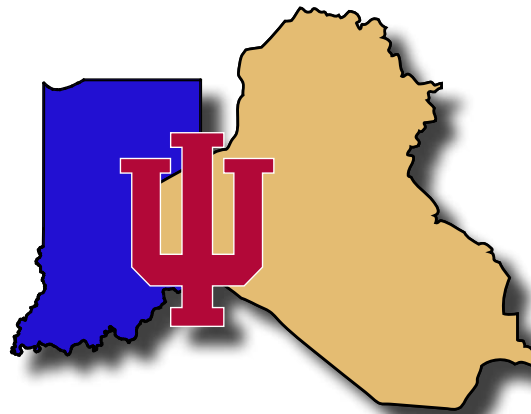


Exchange Beyond Words: Iraqi Students Visit Bloomington

Sometimes progress in world understanding comes quietly. The School of Journalism hosted 15 Iraqi students last summer for a month of intensive study of leadership, civics, and American culture. Students representing the full variety of cultures in Iraq stayed in Eigenmann Hall, participated in classes taught by journalism faculty and community leaders, and visited important cultural destinations from the Indiana State House, to the Monroe County Fair, to a theme park in Kentucky.

The project was more than a year in the planning. The U.S. State Department, through World Learning, a nonprofit organization with a long history in student cultural interactions, chose six destinations in the U.S. Each university hosted a group of students for a month. Host schools developed programs independently, all with a goal of giving the students a chance to see the United States as it sees itself. It took more than 50 Hoosiers—from student mentors, to IU faculty, to government, business, and media leaders around the state—to accomplish that goal.



Although they could have used the visit to provoke a media event, project leaders in the School of Journalism avoided the spotlight. Proof of the project's success came in a final session when the students made their own presentations—complete with images and videos from their visit and from home—to an audience of Hoosiers who had been involved with the program or who somehow heard of the event. Students spoke in the final session of a variety of small surprises: of the open-mindedness they encountered, of the American obsession with schedules and

timeliness (and the quick response in American hospitals to emergencies and illness), of missing fruits and vegetables from home, of opinion pages in U.S. newspapers, of the American fixation on sports. And to the Bloomington audience whose lives follow the rhythm of academe, they showed a video of

one of their own college towns under military attack. When the lights came up at the end of that session, tears flowed and words failed.

Of Note

Exchange is a two-way process; both sides discovered things about themselves and each other that no formal syllabus could detail. The students “told us they came to the United States believing that Americans hated Iraqis,” reports Bonnie J. Brownlee, associate dean for undergraduate studies in journalism and project director. “What they found here were Midwesterners who wanted to talk with them, to listen to their stories, to take them to the county fair or out to a Sunday lunch.”

Although civics and leadership formed the curricular agenda, the learning went deeper. An Iraqi student wrote in an evaluation of the project, “People here are very kind, they tend to do things quietly and quickly.” Another said, “I will never forget the love and hospitality of the Bloomington people.”

During the final session, one student summarized his experience: “I have met myself here. Back at home, I never get that chance.” Students left with plans to join up again at home and to use Facebook to keep the group together until that could happen. Jessica Gall, one of the IU leaders, reports a common reaction on the U.S. side, “I now know much more about Iraq than I did a month ago; yet, I still do not think I have a clear view of the complicated situation. I desperately want to take up the students’ invitations and visit their homeland some day.”

Although six universities hosted Iraqi students last summer, only two will host a new group of students in the summer of 2009. Professor Brownlee recently received word from the State Department that IU has been chosen as one of the two.