

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

Students Live and Learn Engagement

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) freshman Alex Eliades was moving out of a residence hall and scouting a new place to live when he made a final check of his mailbox and found a flyer offering rising sophomores an opportunity to pioneer a living-learning program called VCU Globe. They would move into apartments in a new dorm, take a series of one-credit classes on global issues, participate in extensive cocurricular activities, and serve as mentors and “culture brokers” for the university’s large and growing international student population. In short, they would get a fast introduction to becoming global citizens without leaving Richmond, Virginia.

It was just the ticket for Eliades, a political science and history major whose family emigrated from Greece three generations back. He sees his future lying in the international realm, possibly as a diplomat. “I’ve been using every opportunity I can to find ways to interact with the international community at VCU and in the greater Richmond area,” said Eliades, now a 21-year-old junior. “It’s such a thrill. I wanted to make sure they met someone who could show them cool parts of Richmond and the different things they can do here, and, of course, learn about their countries and what to do if I ever end up in their end of the court.”

Nearly nine in 10 VCU Globe residents are U.S. students. Fifty signed up for VCU Globe the first year, 90 in 2014, and 100 in 2015. The program has given Globe students opportunities to travel to Mexico, Qatar (where VCU has a campus), and Japan. Eliades studied Spanish and tutored children in Zapotec villages in Oaxaca in 2014. Another group journeyed to Doha last March and to Japan this summer.



Student Alex Eliades travelled to Oaxaca, Mexico, and Doha, Qatar, with fellow Globe residents



President Michael Rao with Globe students

Parmida Enayati, 22, a junior from Canada, had just transferred to VCU when she was recruited for Globe. “When I was originally approached, I didn’t really understand what they were talking about and didn’t think I’d be interested, but I’m so happy I changed my mind.”

“It was an amazing place to live,” said Enayati, who was born in Tehran and raised in Vancouver, where her father owns an English language school and her mother is an immigration consultant. “I never imagined in a million years my best friends would be from Korea and other parts of the world.” She added that it made VCU, which enrolls 32,000 students, “so much smaller.” For three-quarters of those on the Qatar trip, the experience was their first time studying abroad.



The living learning community provides global engagement for students who may not be able to study abroad, says Global Education Executive Director R. McKenna Brown.

Quest for Distinction

VCU, located in the heart of Virginia’s capital, enrolls many first-generation college students and Pell Grant recipients, said McKenna Brown, executive director of the Global Education Office.

Six hundred studied abroad in 2013–2014. Even with scholarships, the costs can be daunting for students who may need to “work 60 hours a week in the summer to save (for tuition) or take a course to stay on time to graduate,” Brown said.

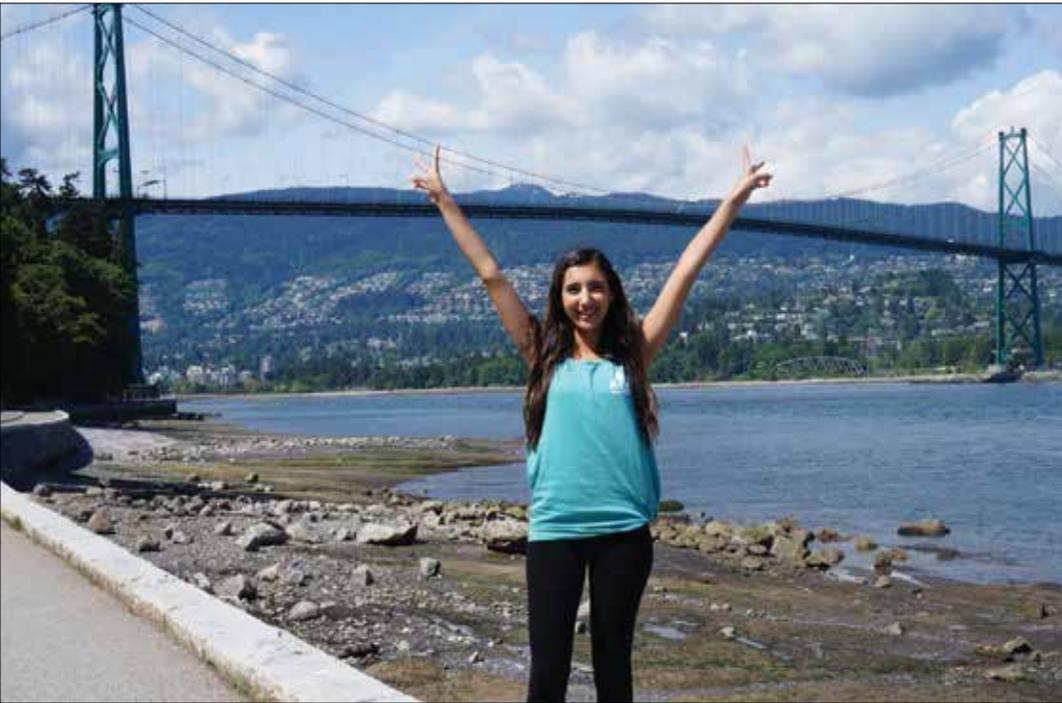
The university made increasing global engagement of students, faculty, and staff a priority in a 2011 “Quest for Distinction” strategic

plan. It built community engagement and service on and off campus into the VCU Globe’s requirements. Students tallied 1,750 hours of service on campus in 2014–2015 and nearly 1,300 hours more providing help in the community, such as volunteering in clinics, schools, and literacy centers in Richmond’s immigrant neighborhoods. Students must perform at least 10 hours of service each semester. Globe residents also hold workshops on American life and customs for VCU’s 1,500 international students, serve as conversation partners, and assist with orientation and adjustment to university life.

“I could have used this when I did my graduate research at the Vatican library,” quipped Globe Director Jill Blondin, an art historian who previously ran a living-learning program at the University of Texas-Tyler. What makes VCU Globe different, Blondin said, is the strong curricular component.

“It’s a six-semester commitment that goes way beyond taking a single credit class here or there.” Students must take a one-credit orientation class, five sequenced, one-credit global seminars, and a three-credit, upper-level elective. A global thrust also is added to their section of a research writing course that is mandatory for all undergraduates.

VCU Globe has attracted students from 30 majors, Blondin said, with biology the most popular (11 percent), followed by international studies (9 percent) and political science (8.5 percent).



Parmida Enyati, making a V for VCU in her hometown of Vancouver, Canada, calls the Globe ‘an amazing place to live’

“It’s a welcoming environment for international students,” said Brown. “It’s a markedly different experience for them. They’re having meaningful, sustained interaction with American students versus what too often happens—maybe a 15-minute awkward conversation at a happy hour without much follow-up.”

Rewarding a Passion

Each semester, Globe names several faculty fellows from an array of fields who emphasize global ramifications of their specialties. Joann Richardson, a kinesiology and health sciences professor, created a service-learning course on community health promotion in global environments.

“It’s been fantastic,” said Richardson. “Often you might get five or six students in a new course. We cross-listed it with my home department, set a 30-student maximum, and got 30 students right away.” Students worked with Vietnamese, Latino, and Filipino immigrants in ethnic enclaves around Virginia and some took a service trip to Jamaica that Richardson led over spring break. In two decades of teaching, it was the first such class she has taught overseas.

The fellows’ departments receive a \$5,000 stipend they can use to support a course release or for professional development. Apart from that, Richardson said, “it’s a career reward to bring my discipline into the Globe and to have it take on that more international perspective. To be able to link what’s a passion for me professionally—promoting community health—to an (international) initiative here at the university was very satisfying.”



Director Jill Blondin believes a strong curricular emphasis makes VCU Globe a distinctive living-learning program.



Joann Richardson, a kinesiology and health sciences professor, serves as a Globe faculty fellow and leads service projects locally and in Jamaica

New Residences Furnish New Opportunities

The Globe is the second living-learning arrangement spawned by the Quest for Distinction—Aspire, the first, stresses community engagement—and more are on the way. The university has opened two new residence halls and is building two more. Nearly 6,000 students now live on campus. In addition to the Globe students, there are 80 additional beds constantly occupied by students in short-term programs from other countries. Two groups of 40 students from the University of Guadalajara each stayed for a month, experiencing U.S. university life and exposing American students to their culture.

International Seminars and Research Grants

There are other inducements to get more faculty to think global. In summer 2013, borrowing an idea from its neighbor, the University of Richmond, VCU held a faculty development seminar in Spain and Morocco to explore migration issues. It took a second group to South Africa in 2014 to examine public health issues; Richardson was among the participants. The Global Education Office’s Brown led a third group to China in June 2015. Faculty are also invited to apply for Quest Global Impact Awards of up to \$20,000 for international projects.

Brown said VCU Globe, the seminars, and other international initiatives share a common purpose articulated in the Quest for Distinction: to further global engagement of students, faculty, and staff “to transform lives and communities.”

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