EL CAMINO COLLEGE
[Grant-Savvy El Camino Finds Partners Far and Wide]

In the state that fired the first shot in the property tax revolt with Proposition 13 more than a quarter-century ago, what are the odds that voters in the South Bay of Los Angeles would approve a $394 million bond issue for their community college?

The odds might be long, but by a margin of 62-38, some 110,000 voters in this ethnically and economically diverse area of southern California did just that in November 2002 by passing “Measure E,” a capital improvement bond, for El Camino College. El Camino is an ambitious institution serving nine cities: El Segundo, Manhattan Beach, Hermosa Beach, Redondo Beach, Torrance, Lawndale, Hawthorne, Lennox, and Inglewood. It opened its doors in 1947 as El Camino Junior College, with 450 students attending classes in nine converted barracks from Santa Ana Army Air Base. Today 25,000 students are enrolled on the campus, which offers 2,500 classes in 85 programs and boasts a 12,500-seat football stadium.

Painstaking Pursuit of Grant Funding
El Camino is also a standout in international education, involving nearly 700 students from other countries and sending more than 100 each summer to study in England, France, China, and New Zealand. Thanks to an aggressive pursuit of federal grants and exchange opportunities and a spirit of inclusiveness among its faculty, El Camino College in the last five years has gotten involved in exchanges that took its faculty to Athens, Poland, Italy, and Lebanon. It was one of two community colleges chosen to participate in the State Department-sponsored Global Experience Through Technology (GETT) initiative that links classrooms in Europe and the Middle East with campuses in the United States.

“There was a time probably when some folks here thought, ‘Well, why are we doing this? We have the general education curriculum to address,’” said Gloria E. Miranda, the dean of Behavioral and Social Sciences and a historian on family life in Spanish and Mexican California. “But with the world today, and with the tragic series of events in the last several years, we really need to understand the multicultural world we live in. And since much of the world migrates to the United States, we must understand the people who come to this country as well.”

Bezena (By) Morton, acting director of the Center for International Education and a prolific grant writer, said, “With international grants, we’ve been extremely lucky. We got almost everything we applied for with one exception.” The Polish-born Morton immigrated to the United States after a decade living in then-Czechoslovakia and teaching English at University of Silesia in Cieszyn, just over the border in Poland.
The lives and careers of several El Camino faculty have taken remarkable international turns thanks to Medrano's uncanny guesstowment, none more so than that of Annette Phillips, a professor of childhood education.

Alumna Leads Child Development Programs Abroad

Phillips is an El Camino success story. She earned her associate's degree in 1973, then joined the faculty after completing a master's degree in childhood education. "I was one of those late bloomers. I didn't go to college until my children started school. I lived right down the street and rode my bike so I didn't have to worry about parking," she said. She excelled in the classroom, but was astonished one day when a mentor told her, "You know, you could do this. You could be a professor."

Phillips volunteered to go to Ukraine for three months in 2001 to teach child development and administration techniques to Ukrainian professors and their students. El Camino had secured an $180,000 three-year grant under a State Department program that links U.S. colleges with universities in the newly independent states of East Europe. El Camino's partner was Dnipropetrovsk National University (DNU) in Dnipropetrovsk, a city of 1 million people on the Dnieper River that was closed for military research during the Soviet era.

"At a faculty meeting I asked, 'Who would like to go to Ukraine?' and I raised my hand. That's how it all started," said Phillips. While their project partners in DNU's Educational Psychology Department spoke fluent English, most of the students and many of the professors with whom Phillips interacted in other places did not. She relied on students and the project's co-director, Tatiana Vvedenska, to translate for her. Vvedenska, a dynamic English professor at DNU, wound up teaching ESL classes at El Camino on a faculty exchange in Spring 2004.

The polyglot Morton calls Phillips "the bravest person" for taking on the assignment. Her dean, Gloria Miranda, accompanied Phillips to Ukraine, but she returned shortly afterwards. "I was there by my lonesome for three months until Bo came over for the last two weeks," said Phillips. Indoors of classrooms and academies, she demonstrated how classes could be taught in more creative ways than simply solely on lectures.

"I had to have an interpreter all the time. That was a little uncomfortable, because it takes away some of my spontaneity—I had to wait after each sentence for it to be translated—but we managed," she said. "I visited a lot of schools from preschool up to universities, went to academies, and spoke to a lot of different classes about the American way of life and American education."
Shed return to her apartment after a day of classes, and using a dial-up connection, teach two education classes online to her students back in California, sharing with them glimpses of life in Ukraine’s third largest city.

Apart from one trip to England, Phillips had not previously traveled outside North America. “It was such a transforming experience for her. What I find so fascinating is that you have faculty who really have never seen the world,” said Miranda. “Even though they are experts in a discipline—Autoethnology is one of our distinguished faculty members—they have not tested how their teaching techniques would apply in a global setting.”

Phillips enjoyed the experience so much that she volunteered to do it again two years later when Morton landed a grant from the Fulbright Educational Partnership Program allowing El Camino to partner on a teacher training with the Chrzan branch of the University of Silesia in Poland, where Morton once taught. There Phillips found the classrooms filled with eager future teachers who spoke English fluently.

Expanding Teacher Exchanges, Online Offerings, and Telecourses

El Camino sent six faculty and administrators to DnIU over four years, and an equal number from the Ukrainian university journeyed to California to visit El Camino’s landscaped campus a few miles south of Los Angeles International Airport. Most of these exchanges lasted two to three weeks. Phillips made a return visit in April 2003 with Elizabeth Shashb, an El Camino philosophy professor who is a skilled hand at distance education.

At home, El Camino’s distance education courses—both online via computer and through telecourses provided on video—are especially popular with students who cannot fit regular class hours into their work or family schedule. “They may be working 40 hours a week or they’ve just had a baby or they have two or three children at home,” said Phillips.

In the Ukraine, the university students were traditional age—18 to 21—and technologically savvy. However, most faculty were lacking in technological literacy, said Shashb, who earned her Ph.D. at Purdue University and taught at California State University at Northridge before joining the El Camino faculty a decade ago.

Like Phillips, Gloria Miranda is also a product of one of California’s many two-year colleges, Compton College. She earned her bachelor’s at Cal State University, Dominguez Hills, and her Ph.D. at the University of Southern California. She chaired the American Cultures and Chicanos Studies programs at Los Angeles Valley College before taking the dean’s post at El Camino.

“The fact that Bocanegra and her unique background has really helped us and our faculty focus on what we can do to expose ourselves and our students to the world around us,” Miranda said.
A two-way Video discussion between classes in El Camino and Ukraine
“The faculty in my division who’ve participated have been almost re-energized by these opportunities.”

With the Ukrainian project, Morton said, “We found out that sending the same faculty members more than once is really a good practice. They are able to do so much more during their second visit because they don’t have this adjustment period.”

The success of the Ukrainian exchange convinced El Camino President Thomas M. Fello to tap some of El Camino’s own resources to support the partnership with the University of Silesia in Cieszyn, Poland. It is a city and region with a turbulent and colorful past and a multicultural mix of identities and ethnicities.

In Poland, Phillips found teacher educators intrigued by her teaching methods, but loathe to give up their reliance on rote lectures. The Polish educators were struggling with how to meet a new mandate for more kindergarten teachers.

**GETTING More Opportunities**

For its next international venture, El Camino was selected to participate in the State Department’s International Work Culture Project using the Global Experience Through Technology (GETT) model pioneered by East Carolina University. Recognizing that fewer than 2 percent of U.S. college students study abroad, this project is designed to expose students to new cultures through virtual classrooms shared with university students in other parts of the world.

This opportunity almost fell into El Camino’s lap.

“After Ukraine we got a good reputation. That project worked well and accomplished what it was supposed to accomplish,” said Morton. “One day I was sitting in my office and I got a call from a new person at the Department of State who told me she was putting together a virtual classroom project. She had heard about the distance education component to our work.”

El Camino partnered again with DNU in this new project, but it also needed to find two other institutions to work with, including one in the Arab world. “Sometimes it’s not easy to put a partnership together. Sometimes you just have to dig, you have to cold call,” said Morton. “I sent e-mails. That’s how I came up with the Iranian partner. Somebody on our faculty said the University of Modena at Reggio Emilia was the best in Italy on early childhood education, and I thought, ‘If we are going to connect with somebody, why not the best?’”

El Camino sent Elizabeth Shahtil, the professor of philosophy, and Joama Medawar Nache, a music professor and choir director, to Europe with bags bulging with videoconference equipment bound for three partner institutions: DNU in Ukraine, the University of Modena at Reggio Emilia, and the Lebanese University in Beirut.
Lebanon. Nacief is an accomplished conductor and choir master who was born in Beirut but earned her degrees (including a doctorate from USC) in the United States. She speaks Arabic and still has extensive contacts in the Lebanese capital.

The two El Camino teachers set up a pilot world cultures course in which a single class of students from the four institutions rotated working with each other online for three to four weeks at a time.

“We had to create a schedule that involved coordinating across time zones, semesters starting at different times, and vacations and holidays happening at different times. You just put together a grid and get a schedule down so that nobody has off times, or at least not too many off times,” said Shadish. “At any point, two institutions were working with each other, ideally for three or four weeks. While we were working with Italy, Lebanon is working with Uruguay. Next rotation we’re talking with Ukraine, while Italy and Lebanon are talking.”

For the pilot, Shadish and Nacief selected El Camino honors students from their own classes. They received no credit, “but they were there the whole semester at 8 in the morning, they saw the value in this,” said Shadish.

They had no trouble finding volunteers, agreed Nacief. “Even at times when there’s an issue and they are only hearing on the other end, the electricity in the room is fascinating,” she said. “These students went back to the choir and my other classes, saying, ‘you can’t believe how exciting it is.’” Students were often disappointed when the allotted hour ran out. “They don’t want to leave the room. They look at their watches. We say we have to end the session and they say, ‘We don’t want to,’” Nacief said.

Nacief laughed as she recalled one incident of strained communication. One student asked a young man in Lebanon if they had rites of passage for special birthdays. She had in mind La Quinceañera, the Latin celebration for a girl’s fifteenth birthday.

The Lebanese student took umbrage, replying back, “Do you think we are barbarians? We dance around fire?”

The puzzled American called out for help to her professor, saying, “Dr. Nacief, I don’t know what to say. He thinks we’re putting them down.”

Amity prevailed after the cultural reference was explained.

Shadish and Nacief plan to offer the cultural exchange course again and involve new countries and universities in GETT. “Where this program can go is so exciting,” Shadish said. “[GETT] is such a pioneer experience that nothing you do is wrong. We’re creating the standards. We’re free to explore what works.”

The Possibilities Seem Endless

El Camino also won Fulbright-Hays funding from the U.S. Department of Education to send 15 teachers—Spanish language teachers and teacher educators from its own faculty and teachers from local elementary schools—on a four-week language and cultural study trip to Guadalajara and Oaxaca, Mexico.

Miranda said El Camino is developing a proposal to partner on an early childhood initiative with two other community colleges in different parts of the United States and three universities overseas.
The possibilities seem endless. "I have a part-time teacher whose father is retired from the University of Ghana," said Miranda. "And Bo and I have been talking about a grant that includes China. We're in such a key position here on the Pacific Coast, and we want to infuse our curriculum with more content that pertains to the Asian world." El Camino has already won backing from the Council for International Exchange of Scholars for its request to have a Middle East scholar spend a semester at the campus as a Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence.

The faculty and the administrators keep coming up with ideas, and Bo Morton, as Miranda put it, "keeps hitting home runs for us."

Even before getting a $694 million makeover courtesy of Measure F—it will take years to complete all the new projects and improvements—El Camino has established itself as a college on the move.