

# Study abroad blossoms at OSU

For some, the idea of getting out of town seems like a dream, especially with the daily routines of school, work and meetings.

For five Oklahoma State University students in the horticulture and landscape architecture department, this dream has become a reality. Two of the students recently returned from Denmark and in spring 2003, the other three will be studying in and enjoying the beauty of Crete, Germany and the Netherlands.

An exchange program offered by the OSU horticulture and landscape architecture department provides these students with the opportunity to study abroad and learn more about the international scope of horticulture. The program, Horticulture in the European Community and the United States, or HORTECUS, is the first horticulture exchange program for the department.

HORTECUS was made available by a grant program through the U.S. Department of Education and by the European Directorate General for Education and Culture.

Hogeschool Delft in the Netherlands, the Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University in Denmark, the Technological Educational Institute of Crete in Greece and the Universität of Hannover in Germany are the four partnership universities in Europe. The U.S. universities participating include Alabama A&M, Purdue University and OSU.

Faculty from participating universities donated their ideas and decided on the application for the program. It took nearly four years and three application processes to gain the nonrenewable grant that funds the exchange program.

“Our primary purpose was to establish study abroad programs among the seven partners,” said Doug Needham, professor of horticulture and landscape architecture.

Involvement in the program was initiated through networking. Needham, who played a role in the establishment

of HORTECUS, helped develop the idea for the program along with Allen Hammer, professor of horticulture at Purdue, whom he had met while in graduate school at Purdue. Hammer had the initial idea to create HORTECUS and contacted Needham to see if OSU would be interested in helping build an exchange program. Hammer’s idea grew into an international exchange that sends U.S. students to Europe and brings European students to the U.S. to study horticulture.

The three-year grant compensates the 35 students participating in the six-month exchange for moving and living expenses while at their host universities. Students are required to pay a program fee of \$175, which covers health insurance and the purchase of an international student identification card. They are also required to obtain a passport. The study abroad coordinators at the respective universities provide living arrangements for the students.

Rob Brown of Tulsa, Okla., and Kristina Lewis of Ponca City, Okla., were first-time OSU participants in the program. They traveled to Denmark and studied European horticulture from February through June 2002.

“Living in another country was exciting and invigorating,” said Brown.



Chris Rasmussen (left), Pia Mortensen are attending OSU as exchange students from Denmark as a part of the HORTECUS program. They are discussing plant variations and horticultural differences between Denmark and the United States with Doug Needham. (Photo by Misti Sloan)

Compared to OSU's almost 20,000 students, the Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University is extremely small, with only 3,500 students.

"Despite the size of the university, it had state-of-the-art laboratory and greenhouse facilities," said Lewis.

OSU received two exchange students during the same time period. Chris Rasmussen and Pia Mortensen came from Denmark and studied horticulture at OSU.

"We were the test pilots for the program," said Rasmussen.

The program is offered to all students in the horticulture departments within the participating universities.

"We were the ones who were most interested in the program," said Mortensen, Danish horticulture student and HORTECUS participant, explaining why she and Rasmussen were selected to travel abroad as the exchange students from their university.

Along with the study abroad coordinators, faculty also help students with the transition and cultural changes they face when moving to a new country.

"They really knew what we needed," said Mortensen.

Any horticulture student who has completed his or her sophomore year and is in good standing at OSU is eligible for the program. The first step is filling out an application form and submitting it to Needham. He then distributes the applications to all faculty members within the seven universities in the program to inform faculty of the students who are interested in the exchange. However, selection of students to participate in the program is ultimately determined by the home institution.

While participating in the exchange, students take classes at the host university and are required to complete an internship or research project.

Although students can take any course they wish while at their host universities, one of the main objectives of the program is to keep students on track for their graduation dates by allowing them to take courses that will transfer to their home institutions.

"We want those courses they are taking abroad to contribute to their option sheet," said Needham. "If they don't, we want the courses to be of tremendous horticulture benefit to the students."

HORTECUS not only challenges students to grow academically, but in personal and cultural ways as well.



*Sarah O'Neal starts preparing early for her exchange experience, which will take place in spring 2003 at the Universität of Hannover in Germany. (Photo by Misti Sloan)*

"I'd call HORTECUS a facilitator," said Brown. "It is a facilitator for cultural exchange and for academic progress."

Although students are allowed to exchange throughout all three years of the grant's duration, during years two and three of the grant faculty at host universities also will participate in the exchange. For one-month periods faculty members will travel to one of the cooperating universities and teach in their areas of specialization.

"There is tremendous value in faculty traveling abroad and bringing back vital information to share with students and peers," said Needham.

Continuation of the program after the grant expires is based upon the development of a new course in international horticulture. The course is unique because it is Web-delivered and will be provided at no charge to consortium partners; however, universities that are not partners will be charged a fee for the course. The intent of the fee is to develop on-going funds to help with the continuation of the study abroad program.

Although all slots are filled to participate in the exchange program, faculty continue to work to extend the life of HORTECUS. Interested students are encouraged to visit with Needham or any of the HORTECUS participants to gain more insight about the program.

◆ *By Misti Sloan, Shattuck, Okla.*