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Students Learn About Culture, Energy in Vietnam

Fourteen students from USF St. Petersburg, USF, and St. Petersburg College are traveling and taking in the exotic sites of Vietnam as part of an Education Abroad partnership this summer.

“This is one of the highlights of my career,” said Dr. Frank Biafora, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at USF St. Petersburg, who served as a Fulbright Scholar in North Vietnam in 2005 and recently completed an American Council on Education (ACE) fellowship with St. Petersburg College. “As part of my ACE Fellowship at SPC this past year, I worked with President Law and his team to bring this opportunity and to think of others that would strengthen global learning experiences for our SPC neighbors.”

The three-week Education Abroad trip pairs students from the three Florida institutions with students from Vinh University in Vietnam. The students live together in the residence halls, eat together, and take classes together that are taught by Biafora and USF Physics Professor Sarath Witanachchi titled “Vietnam in Transition: The Rise of Modern Vietnam” and “Energy in Humanity.” Additional guest lectures also are given by Vihn University faculty.
“We’re learning about how the transformation of Vietnam into a developing country and how it affects energy production and how they can incorporate renewable energy into the process,” said Amada Fernandez, 19, a sophomore Environmental Science major at USFSP. She said she has never visited Asia but has always had a strong interest in learning about some of its cultures.

“A huge benefit of this program is to do things American students normally can’t do by immersing ourselves in their culture to challenge our beliefs and assumptions,” said Fernandez, who was interviewed by local Vietnamese media about her experiences as a tourist while visiting the Ho Loang Bay area. “I had a lot of assumptions, and these classes made me really challenge how they are as a person and a country. It certainly puts everything into perspective.”

Trang Pham, 21, an English major at Vinh University, said she enrolled in the “Vietnam in Transition” class to help improve her English language skills.

“I am going to be an English teacher—listening and speaking is not good enough,” said Pham, who is excited to learn more about American styles and customs. “Even though I’m Vietnamese, I think it’s a challenge for me to get more knowledge about my country and customs, so I’ve decided to join this program.”

Pham said one of her biggest takeaways was seeing the interaction with American students and their professors. “It is different I think because of the equality of the American students and teachers in the classroom,” she said. “They challenge teachers so much. In Vietnam, the teacher has the highest position in the entire class. We just stay silent and listen to what the teacher says.”

Biafora said the trip is particularly poignant for two Vietnamese-American students.

“When people come on this trip whose families are part of Vietnam history, they don’t know what to expect,” said Biafora. “Looking at this trip through their eyes has been extraordinary. The emotions are really strong among the Vietnamese students who come back here, and it’s amazing to watch them fall in love with their country all over again.”

The class, which departed the U.S. on July 11, will return July 30. View more photos from the trip on the Facebook photo gallery.
STUDENTS LEARN ABOUT CULTURE, ENERGY IN VIETNAM

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