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UNO program expands students' horizons

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DeSean Young knew enough about Latin American culture to order a taco or enchilada at a local Mexican restaurant.

His political science classes at the University of Nebraska at Omaha had provided him plenty of academic background.

But until a summer trip to the South American country of Peru — set up by the UNO Office of Latino-Latin American Studies, known as OLLAS — the realities of foreign policies didn't really sink in.

"I got to live another person's life, if only for a brief moment," the 22-year-old Omaha native said upon his return from Lima.

The two-week study abroad experience, to be followed up with community service-learning activities, represents further maturation of the UNO Latino Studies program created five years ago with \$1 million in federal funds secured by U.S. Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb. Other local donations and foundation grants have helped expand activities.

Founders in 2003 envisioned the office as an academic arm that would help policy-makers and students understand changes in a state that demographers agree has become a new "immigrant gateway."

More recently, OLLAS was awarded the designation of "center," which signals a higher level of recognition and standing by the university, said director Lourdes Gouveia.

Projects have included research on Latino political involvement, education and second-generation immigrants. A coming report will examine the economic impact of immigrants on Nebraska. The center also hosts information-sharing summits between foreign scholars and local community members.

Hagel commended the center, saying it has helped bridge cultural, political and economic gaps within communities.

"Building relationships based not on differences, but on common interests, is the foundation for meeting the world's enormous challenges and opportunities of the 21st Century," Hagel said.

The Peru-based course was the Latino Studies center's first student venture abroad. Young and eight other students learned from a local professor and from officials at Lima's City Hall, nascent stock market, institutions of higher learning, ecological preserves and an international shipping port.

"The course literally takes service learning at UNO to a new place," said Paul Sather, director of the UNO Service Learning Academy.

Besides the OLLAS Department of Education grant, partial funding for the course also was provided by UNO's Service Learning Academy and Distance Education.

Gouveia said Nebraska "in leaps and bounds" is joining the global economy not only by way of human migration but also by importing and exporting of goods and services.

Through Peru and other international trips to come, she said, students will be better able to put immigration and other trends into a global context.

"Not only do they learn about Latin American societies and the dynamics that may or may not fuel migration, they'll also experience on their own what it is to be in another culture, to see how difficult it is to learn another society's norms."

While there, students also helped construct a child care center in the small town of Los Olivos.

For Young, a graduate of Benson High School, the Lima stay was his first outside the U.S.

He learned about budgeting, foreign governments and globalization.

He said he also learned that students abroad were intensely curious and concerned about what was going on in the U.S. and countries around them.

He picked up a fancy for more authentic cuisine and drink, like Inca Kola. And he plans to start volunteering and mentoring in local Latino neighborhoods.

"It helped with thinking outside the box," Young said. "You can take what you see and learn, and apply that at home."