



At the
Crossroads
of the
World

For more than 60 years St. Olaf College students have studied at the University of Oslo's International Summer School, a place that fosters multicultural understanding and goodwill between nations.

By David McKay Wilson

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SISSEL DREVSJØ



GRETA BERG '10 GREW UP IN MINNESOTA surrounded by Norwegian–American culture. She ate lutefisk at Christmas, wore a colorful *bunad* on Norwegian Constitution Day, listened to her grandfather's tales about Norway and immersed herself in the traditions of her ancestral homeland at Skogfjorden summer camp in northern Minnesota.

But she'd never stepped foot on Norwegian soil until this summer, when she joined five St. Olaf students and three faculty members at the 62nd session of the International Summer School (ISS) at the University of Oslo. There she studied Norwegian art and literature, joined in discussions with students from around the world, tried out the Norwegian language on the streets of Oslo and took a four-day trip through the mountains to the rural fjord villages of western Norway with students from several nations, many of whom experienced snow for the first time.

Berg's trip to Vestlandet was among the highlights of her six-week session at the International Summer School, a program that blends rigorous academic coursework with cultural and social events and peace-building experiences. St. Olaf College students travel and study the world over, but the continuing participation of Oles at the International Summer School reinforces the special link between St. Olaf and Norway. The school thrives on the sprawling University of Oslo campus, where the red and yellow roses by the Blindern Studenterhjem residence hall were in full bloom in mid-July.



Field work is crucial to many of the ISS courses. Students like Greta Berg '10 (top) spent hours viewing the work of painter Edvard Munch at the museum dedicated solely to his work and the Gustav Vigeland sculptures in Oslo's Frognerpark. "This summer has really opened up my eyes to the world," says Berg.





Most cross-cultural learning doesn't take place in the classroom. It takes place in the residence and dining halls or on field trips to the villages, cities, art museums and fjords of Norway.

The International Summer School was founded in the heady years following World War II as a way for Norway to thank the United States for helping liberate Norway from Nazi Germany and for opening American college classrooms to Norwegian students at

a time when its universities, stripped of their resources, were still recovering from the war. St. Olaf College was there from the start, heading up the school's U.S. admissions office (see sidebar). More than six decades later, St. Olaf continues its association with the school, with Torild Homstad '71 serving as administrator of the ISS's North American office, handling admissions for students from the United States and Canada.

"The aim of the International Summer School, like the aim of international programs at St. Olaf College," Homstad says, "is to integrate academic and experiential education so that it will enhance students' global perspective and help students to encounter and understand changes confronting our world in a context of global community and world citizenship."

With its international student body and faculty, the ISS offers St. Olaf students an opportunity to get to know people from Azerbaijan to Zimbabwe.

"Students take home with them not only their newly

acquired academic knowledge and the magical experience of a Norwegian summer, but also a broader and more direct international awareness gained through the creation of friendships with people from all corners of the world," says Homstad.

FRIENDLINESS, FRANKNESS AND TOLERANCE

The International Summer School enjoys strong support from the Norwegian government, which provides generous scholarship aid to scores of students from the developing world. This June, Oslo Mayor Fabian Stang welcomed the students at Oslo's city hall, while former Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik joined the former president of Iran, Muhammed Khatami, one afternoon to discuss reducing tensions and creating trust between the Islamic world and the West.

This summer, 590 students from 93 countries attended the summer school, which included students from North Korea and Senegal, countries that sent students to the ISS for the first time. Students ranged in age from 17 to 74, with the average age 28. They came to the ISS to study Norwegian language, art history or literature, and subjects such as political science, international relations, peace research, international health, and energy and sustainable environment, where the Norwegian model served as a basis for discussion.

A look at the student bulletin board in mid-July shows how dialogue and sharing is in high gear. For the upcoming international cultural evening, students rehearse folk dance from Bangladesh, Zambia and Chechnya while Russians and Americans practice traditional folk songs. The sign-up sheet for the international cooking night indicates that the menu will include Swiss fondue, bean soup from Vietnam, an Armenian vegetable and beef dish, and a sweet dessert from Australia. There's international coed volleyball and soccer tournaments, folk-dance instruction by students from Azerbaijan, as well as art exhibits by students from Indonesia, Belarus and Canada.

The world has changed dramatically since the ISS was founded 62 years ago, with the rise of the Cold War, the end of African colonialism, the demise of the Soviet Union, the development of the European Union, and the continuing conflict in the Middle East. Norway, an oil-rich nation of only 4.7 million people that is the home of the Nobel Peace Prize, plays an active role in international issues, using its influence and foreign aid to foster reconciliation and development around the globe.

While North Americans were the only students in the program in the late 1940s, today they comprise only about 20 percent of the ISS students and come from 52 colleges and universities in the United States and Canada. The shift to a more international program came as early as the 1960s, as Norwegian educators and foreign-policy experts within the Norwegian government sought a broader audience for the ISS.

The school is also a host for informal discussions about the place of the United States in the world today, which is far different than it was when the United States was one of the only countries leading international peace efforts. Today, the United States is embroiled in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that are quite unpopular to many in Europe. And while Norwegians embrace Americans and American culture, some oppose U.S. foreign policy. Even the Norwegian government, a longtime ally, has had issues with the United States, as the Norwegian foreign minister in July said that the American "war on terrorism has isolated the [United States] and polarized the world."

Leif Berg '09, a computer science major who studied Norwegian literature and art, had never participated in classroom discussions like those he experienced at the ISS.

"I'm not sure what I expected," he says, noting that while most of the time the discussions were limited to the topic of the day, there were times when more controversial topics arose. "It was interesting to see what people truly thought, and it's easy to see that the United States is isolated from Europe. I felt a sense of connectedness among the international students, a feeling that being around people from other countries wasn't really a new thing for some of them. As an American, it was very new."

BUILDING BRIDGES FOR PEACE AND UNDERSTANDING

The ISS has long served as a meeting place for students of nations embroiled in conflict. In the 1980s, Americans and Soviets gathered in Oslo to forge relationships outside the Iron Curtain. In the early 1990s, students from the Balkans



Ivan Sukovic (above, left), a professor of literature at the University of Montenegro and Serbian political scientist Branislav Radeljic (above, right), a doctoral student at the University of London, led discussions in conflict resolution during a peace building course.



"It isn't just the Western point of view that we hear," says Jessica Magnuson '09 (middle, left). "Learning how a Serbian, Brazilian or Russian views the United States challenged my previously conceived notions of what I thought I knew, and I think I'm better for it."



arrived to study away from the ethnic and religious strife that fueled violence throughout that region, and the ISS "Shalom/Salaam" project was created to build a bridge between Israeli and Palestinian students.

Students are invited to participate in conflict resolution using dialogue as an instrument. "They are asked to find similarities in their personal lives, in their values. It is important that the process toward understanding be organic," explains Einar Vannebo, who joined the International Summer School in 1988 and became its director in 1992. "We cannot lecture these students [from conflicted countries] because then we become the outsider and the student feels that we don't understand any of it. We can analyze their situation rationally, but we have never experienced their emotional turmoil. It's so much more complex than any of us can ever really understand, and it's important that we not have any ready-made solutions."

For many of the international students, this is the first time they've been away from home. They may arrive in Oslo with preexisting stereotypes and bias; others come with a heightened sense of their national identity. Some are very sensitive to any personal criticism or attacks directed toward their country.

"Students often feel that they are held responsible for what their ethnic group does," says Vannebo. "To meet another



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person and find that he or she is not a stereotype

is a revelation for these students. They return to their countries with a picture of the world that is not as black and white as when they came to Oslo.”

St. Olaf students find their international peers quite opinionated about

the United States’ place in the world, and they were also noted to be keen observers of the 2008 presidential election campaign.

“You hear both the positive and the negative,” says Jessica Magnuson ’09, an English and psychology major from Leicester, Massachusetts. “Participating in the discussions was, at times, a bit intimidating, especially in my *International Politics* class where sensitive topics were brought up regularly. It isn’t just the Western point of view that we hear. Learning how a Serbian, Brazilian or Russian views the United States challenged my previously conceived notions of what

citizen of the world, part of the larger human race. And seeing how people from different countries interact and work for the common good gave me hope for the future.”

In addition to the six current St. Olaf students and alumnus Matthew Abbas ’06, among those attending ISS classes was St. Olaf Art and Art History Professor Mary Griep, who took *Art in Norway: From the Viking Age to the Present*, which included classroom sessions and several excursions to Oslo museums.

“When you share a bathroom and a corridor with people from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Western hemisphere you must learn about other people and their customs and need to negotiate ways of living together in close proximity,” says Griep. “I have listened to an American Public Media podcast on Muslim women in America in a dorm room with young Muslim women from Malaysia and Yemen. I have been privileged to share their daily life, being present during daily prayers and private moments when the headscarves are removed. It was wonderful and challenging.”

ACADEMICS, INTERACTION, CONFLICT RESOLUTION

This year, several students from the nations carved from the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union arrived a week early, meeting at the Nansen Academy in Lillehammer for discussions on conflict resolution and hoping to find common ground in the aftermath of decades of unrest. The session taught students about peace and conflict — why conflicts happen, the dynamics that drive them and the dilemmas facing those who want to build peace. It was preparation for a course in peace research at the International Summer School.

Among those participating in the sessions were Serbian political scientist Branislav Radeljic, a doctoral student at the University of London, and Ivan Sukovic, a professor of literature at the University of Montenegro.

Sukovic says sitting down for discussions with students from different nations in the region was an opportunity for personal contact and understanding. Ethnic tensions remain in the former Yugoslavia among Muslims, Croats, Serbs, Catholics and Albanians.

“We realized we are all together in this,” says Sukovic. “It’s all part of the process of reconciliation.”

There were several Iraqis attending the ISS this summer as well. Although there was no formal program to bring Americans and Iraqis together, students like Claire Gilbert ’10 found time to talk with an Iraqi student, making the kind of person-to-person contact that Gilbert believes will pay dividends down the line.

“While I cannot say that I know how to resolve the conflict in Iraq, open, honest and genuine conversation might be a place to start,” says Gilbert, an English major from Sacramento,

St. Olaf students such as Elizabeth Van Vleet ’10 (top, left) who chose to study at the ISS happily immersed themselves in all things Norwegian. “My experiences made me feel more like a citizen of the world,” says Leif Berg ’09 (middle, right). An unexpected benefit for St. Olaf Art Professor Mary Griep (bottom) has been the experience of being a student again. “It’s good to remember how stressful it can be ... I’m sure the experience will inform my teaching and give me a renewed level of empathy.”

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Most cross-cultural learning doesn’t take place in the classroom, however. It takes place in the residence and dining halls, on field trips to the art museums and fjords of rural Norway, or at sporting events. Rooming with students from Mexico, the Netherlands, Ethiopia and South Africa often does more to foster cross-cultural ties than any discussion in class.

“People are people. Sure, it sounds simple, but I was surprised by how much the other ISS students, young and old, were just like everyone else,” says Leif Berg. “I know I’m an American, but my experiences made me feel more like a

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California. “The fact that I can come to Norway and have a normal conversation with an Iraqi student means that we are not beyond resolution.”

In addition to undergraduates like Gilbert, the ISS program also attracts graduate students, professionals and retirees looking to learn more about Norwegian culture or bone up on their Norwegian. Courses this summer included elementary, intermediate and advanced Norwegian, Norwegian literature and history, *International Politics*, *Gender Equality in the Nordic Countries*, *Contemporary Norwegian Society*, *International Community Health*, *Energy Planning and Sustainable Development*, *Peace Research*, and *International Development Studies*.

Field work is crucial to many of the courses. Those studying energy planning, for example, visited hydroelectric plants, while students of *Contemporary Norwegian Society* spent an afternoon at a Norwegian minimum-security women’s prison, learning how the nation’s criminal justice system works to rehabilitate its criminals for reentry into society. Art history students, meanwhile, spent hours studying the 212 bronze and granite sculptures by Gustav Vigeland in Oslo’s Frognerpark and viewing the psychologically gripping work of painter Edvard Munch at the city museum dedicated solely to his work.

Art Professor Griep, whose journey to Norway came at the end of her current sabbatical, arrived in Norway a week early to spend time in the village of Lærdal, photographing and sketching the Borgund stave church, built in the 12th century, and among 28 mediaeval wooden churches still standing across Norway. It’s part of Griep’s series of large-scale drawings of mediaeval sacred spaces, begun a decade ago, which includes the Chartres Cathedral in France, Angkor Wat in Cambodia, a Burmese temple, Turkish mosque and Mayan palace.

“The Nygaard Foundation funded travel expenses in Norway for me to research a stave church so that I might include one in my series,” she explains, “and the resulting drawing will become part of St. Olaf College’s permanent collection.”

Classroom instruction, which encourages student interaction, is important as well. In an elementary Norwegian class one morning, instructor Audun Toven engaged students in conversation about what they’d done the previous weekend. Down the hall, instructor Kirsten Kalleberg led students of Norwegian literature in a discussion about Amalie Skram’s classic short story, *Karen’s Christmas*, in which a baby freezes to death on the streets a few days before Christmas. This



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classic example of Norwegian naturalism provokes a spirited debate, with a French student insisting it was the state’s responsibility to save the child while an Italian student argues that it was the individual’s responsibility, as part of the state, to respond to the child in need.

That dialogue continues that morning in *Contemporary Norwegian Society*, a class taught by St. Olaf Professor of Norwegian Margaret Hayford O’Leary. O’Leary likes to stress three themes in the Norwegian mentality: moderation, nearness to nature and equality. Moderation exhibits itself in the Norwegian’s thrifty lifestyle, such as packing their lunches to go to work or school, and the Norwegian preference to make dinner at home instead of going out to eat. The Norwegians are close to nature, even in their big cities of Oslo and Bergen, where vast tracts of land remain forested or preserved as parkland, and many Norwegians have a cabin at a lake in the mountains or near a fjord that they can visit during summer or spring vacations.

This morning, the class examines statistical data about Norwegian society, where the fertility rate is among Europe’s highest — 1.5 per woman. One student suggests it might be due to Norway’s generous family-leave policy, in which 75 percent of Norwegian women qualify for 52 weeks of maternity leave at 80 percent pay. The data also reveals average pay



rates for professions, revealing that Norwegian teachers earn much more than those working for the central government, a fact of considerable note for a Russian student who saw things very differently at home.

All classroom dialogue is part of the ISS commitment to an interactive and comparative approach to education for the students from around the world.

“There are often as many nationalities represented in a class as there are students,” says Vannebo. “It is especially engaging to study topics when one can, through examples and discussion, use the different cultural backgrounds of the students to offer a comparative perspective. We see our students as a resource, with the ISS providing an academic and a cultural setting where students can develop a multicultural competency through both formal and informal dialogue.”

Years from now, St. Olaf students who studied at the ISS may not remember the specifics of their courses, but they will remember the students from the Middle East or Zimbabwe, India or Cuba or Yemen who became their friends, broadened their world and changed their perspective.

“As the program ends, those of us with children and spouses back in our home countries are trading photos not of ourselves but of our families,” says Griep. “As my neighbor across the hall, Hasten from Malawi, said, ‘I need to show my family my American friend and her family. Our families will always be connected.’” 🦊

DAVID MCKAY WILSON, a New York-based freelance journalist, attended Firda Gymnas in Sandane, Norway.

A Force for Peace

By Carole Leigh Engblom

The International Summer School at the University of Oslo was founded to promote peace through education. The notion was that if young people lived together with individuals from other countries and shared themselves and their ideas, stereotypes would be shattered. The school was idealistic and complicated, but under the right circumstances the Norwegians felt it was worth a try.

The summer school was inspired by the motto of the post-World War II institution UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization): “Since wars begin in the minds of people, it is in the minds of people that peace must be built.” In 1947, 800 American youth, the largest single educational contingent to leave for Europe after the war, boarded the *Marine Jumper* and *Marine Tiger*, troop transport ships supplied by the U.S. State Department. Two hundred and forty students were bound for Oslo, the others for France, Austria, Holland and Belgium. Their purpose was to learn, to teach and to help rebuild Europe.

Among the students bound for Oslo was Lloyd Hustvedt '49, then a St. Olaf senior and later a St. Olaf professor of Norwegian, and Gerald Thorson who became a St. Olaf English professor. The St. Olaf connection went even deeper. Reidar Dittmann

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'47, professor emeritus of Norwegian and art and former director of international studies, was equally active in the preparations for the first session in 1947 and continued to teach at the school over the years. Norman Norstrand, a member of the summer school planning committee, was in Oslo as an American-Scandinavian Foundation fellow while on leave from his position as dean of academic instruction at St. Olaf. Nordstrand spent the next four summers in Oslo serving as the school's dean of students. After his first year it was decided that St. Olaf College — a fertile recruiting ground — should become the school's North American center. And so, in 1948, the school's North American admissions office, the only one besides the Oslo headquarters, was established on the St. Olaf campus.

Within 10 years of its founding, 32 countries were represented at the school and the original Summer School for American Students became the International Summer School. In addition to an international academic curriculum, the school also began to offer courses in peace research in conjunction with the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo and the Nobel Institute. Over the years, the courses have dealt with theories of conflict, peace and development, and the structure of international systems. The school's focus varies as conflicts arise in different areas of the world. St. Olaf College also contributes to the cause of world peace as a member of the consortium of five Midwestern Lutheran colleges of Norwegian heritage that sponsors the annual Peace Prize Forum.