

International Honors Neighbors

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Abstract: A cohort of five students and one faculty member share ways in which their Bulgarian study abroad experience (2024) built upon an existing international partnership and, in so doing, aligned with the tenets of, and goals for, “neighborhoods” as described by Dr. Ada Long (1945–2024). The authors describe lessons learned through the unique pedagogy and practices of NCHC’s City as Text®, suggesting that honors may be especially well suited for neighborly international exchange. The authors describe their study abroad experiences as being effective in developing a sense of global citizenship across cultural divides and cultivating an actual sense of knowing international neighbors.

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In her 1995 NCHC Conference Presidential Address, “Honors as Neighborhood,” Ada Long describes neighborhoods as “places where people know each other,” where there is “familiarity and closeness.” Neighborhoods may lead to “a sense of belonging,” explains Long, adding that neighborhoods are places “where people help each other out.” Ultimately, as a highest neighborly goal, Long proposes finding new ways of “opening up our conversations,” of “widening our loyalties, and deepening our responsibilities.” She suggests that we should expand “our human connections in ways that cut across geography, class, and culture” (Long 5, 6, 9).

Four years prior to Long’s address, the University of Maine (UMaine) formalized a partnership with international neighbors in Bulgaria, cutting across cultural divides and developing a global friendship that honors

students and faculty built upon through a spring 2024 *Honors Abroad in Bulgaria* program. The University of Maine served as the “contracting institution” for the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG) when it opened on 1 September 1991. AUBG would be a four-year English-language, liberal arts institution borrowing UMaine’s NEASC accreditation but remaining its own “independent” university. Blagoevgrad, 100 kilometers south of Sofia, was chosen as the site for AUBG with the city’s former Communist Party Headquarters as its main building. AUBG’s initial funding came from the Bulgarian government, USAID, USIA, and the Soros Foundation, while UMaine provided occasional payroll loans during AUBG’s early, unstable financial years (Pickering and McConnell 1-3; Watkins 13, 19). Some of the first AUBG faculty came from UMaine, along with several administrators, including AUBG President Julia M. Watkins, who served from 1993 to 2003 (Watkins 12, 14, 16-17).

As part of its land-grant and sea-grant mission, UMaine committed to increasing its international involvement in the early 1990s. Serving as the contracting institution for AUBG provided an excellent opportunity to establish a unique “link” to another place and people, “widening our loyalties” and “deepening our responsibilities,” as Long suggests neighbors ought to do (Pickering and McConnell 4; Long 9). The UMaine and AUBG offices for international programs co-created a direct exchange for their students to study abroad at each institution, and in spring 2024 the UMaine Honors College offered an experimental *Honors Abroad in Bulgaria* program, sending the first-ever cohort of five UMaine honors students to AUBG, along with an honors faculty member, Mimi Killinger.

The Black Sea region was a fraught area that spring as the Russian war against Ukraine intensified. Yet the five UMaine honors students and Killinger found their AUBG exchange community peaceful and welcoming. Together with a few AUBG students, they embarked upon two honors courses offered by Killinger as part of their AUBG courseload; the honors courses were introductions to landscape history and local culture, following the NCHC City as Text® pedagogy. CAT encourages critical inquiry and active learning through structured explorations. It looks to urban areas as laboratories rife with competing forces through which students might deepen their understanding of places and themselves. CAT “walkabouts” integrate mapping, observation, listening, and reflecting exercises that prompt students to move beyond simple inquiry as they consider their own lenses and how it is they see (Braid 24).

Honors student Abigail Arnold reflected on the CAT exercise of mapping during a short honors excursion from Bulgaria to Rome. Arnold described a Roman tattoo shop as the most meaningful space for her that she mapped in Rome. It was comforting to Arnold because tattoo shops are filled with people like Arnold who express themselves through visual art and the anatomy of the body. The walls of the Roman tattoo shop were red and covered with frames of artwork and tattoo ideas that were much like what she had seen elsewhere. The artists wore familiar black clothing and beanies, with similar piercings and tatted arms. There was a glass counter that allowed customers to see the jewelry used for piercing options; a couch offered a place to sit when waiting for the artist to set up; and a purely white back room held three tattoo benches covered in black fabric and beds wrapped in tissue paper. There was a curtain that allowed privacy for clients behind which Arnold's "soulmate" worked, a cute man—who wore a beanie and had many arm tattoos—to whom she felt a profound connection.

Arnold described her transition into Europe through Bulgaria as a metaphoric journey into who she was and what she wished to see in life. Mapping explorations allowed Arnold to grow a new set of eyes, while also appreciating things that eyes cannot see, like the recognition of a soulmate. Arnold learned to engage with new cities as "places where people know each other," where there is "familiarity and closeness," like the quintessential "neighborhood" Long describes (5).

Honors student Katharine Poulin found observing the dynamics of Bulgaria and its people during her time in *Honors Abroad in Bulgaria* both humbling and enriching. Through CAT observations, she paid careful attention to the unexpected and the expected, as well as to who seemed to belong. At UMaine, Poulin needed a car to go to a store or restaurant, whereas in Blagoevgrad everything was within walking distance, including a grocery store right next to campus, which was surprising and luxurious. Remarkable affordability was another positive characteristic of Bulgaria, but other observed cultural differences proved troubling, like the practice of letting hot food cool before serving or the pervasive smoking everywhere.

Poulin described as both rewarding and challenging her observation of her own minority status in Bulgaria. Despite AUBG's diverse student body, most students around her were Bulgarian, or from a neighboring country, or could speak fluent Bulgarian. She heard almost exclusively Bulgarian in the residence halls. Since Poulin did not speak the language nor was she from a country similar to Bulgaria, she felt the alienation of being a minority at

an unfamiliar university and in a strange city. She believed this firsthand experience of being a minority was the most important understanding she took away from her semester abroad in Bulgaria. Back home in homogeneous Maine, she had been part of the majority and had rarely interacted with different people. *Honors Abroad in Bulgaria* pushed her to recognize her former majority social position and to re-evaluate her majority privilege. Moreover, observing and interacting with AUBG neighbors forced her to understand herself not just in a North American context but in a global one as well and to work toward “a sense of belonging” in a more heterogeneous world (Long 5).

Honors student Kailee Soucia noted lessons learned through listening during her *Honors Abroad in Bulgaria* experience. CAT listening exercises encourage explorers to talk with people they do not know, to try to understand what matters to them and why. Soucia reflected upon a conversation that she had with a Dutch roommate one night at a hostel in Rome during the honors excursion there. The roommate asked Soucia what the U.S. was like, inquiring especially about guns. The roommate from Holland, unaccustomed to guns, had assumed that Americans were used to seeing big guns like those around the Vatican and in other parts of Rome. Soucia explained that the Roman guns were a surprise to her as well, that she was not used to seeing guns in public places or a strong military presence.

Soucia’s Bulgarian friends also asked her if she owned a gun or had shot one, if the United States was like the movies, if high school was like *Mean Girls*, and if certain American cities were like what was shown on TikTok. Soucia listened to how much social media had influenced their worldviews and determined that she would work toward more truthful, cross-cultural understanding. Long suggests that neighborhoods are places “where people help each other out,” and Soucia became committed to helping others grasp how neighbors really live (Long 5).

Honors student Abby Bouchard described the CAT strategy of reflecting as especially meaningful for her. In reflections, the CAT explorer notes one’s own biases—the lenses through which we see and judge—while also considering elements of dominance or control, analyzing who holds power in a particular space and why. Bouchard described having begun her explorations of Bulgaria by first finding the country on a map. She used the surrounding countries—Romania, Greece, Turkey, Serbia, North Macedonia—and the Slavic accent of the woman who processed her visa application at the Consulate General of Bulgaria in New York to construct her idea of Bulgarian culture, which she imagined to be cold and very different from

the Maine where she had grown up. The little she knew about Bulgarian history also led her to believe that the people of Bulgaria would be unfriendly to outsiders and that the dominant, collective cultural attitude would reflect past hardships.

Once Bouchard actually experienced Bulgaria as a student, however, she found it to be a lively place with a rich culture and differing attitudes between younger and older generations. Bulgaria was, in fact, an impoverished country that had been through many hardships, yet a powerful characteristic she observed in the country and people was perseverance, and her interactions with them broke down many of her preconceptions. For example, Bouchard was attacked on a sidewalk near campus by a Bulgarian assailant who grabbed her, ripped off her necklace, received a punch in the eye from Bouchard's walking companion, then ran away with her necklace. At first she had been hesitant to talk to Bulgarian authorities or even to people at AUBG about the incident. Bouchard quickly learned, however, that such an incident was almost unheard of at AUBG, that the AUBG staff members were responsive and supportive, and that the policemen were helpful and reassuring. Being a student in Bulgaria allowed her to open her mind, to reflect on and to accept people for who they really were, and to find "new ways of opening up our conversations" with Bulgarian neighbors (Long 9).

Gabriella Shetreet considered ways that CAT mapping, observing, listening, and reflecting aided in her development as a global citizen and neighbor. Shetreet noted that the U.S.A.'s physical separation from the majority of the world by vast oceans makes it easier for Americans to self-isolate and to close off from other cultures. Shetreet explained that the Spanish language has two verbs that mean "to know," distinguishing between theoretical and actual knowledge: *saber* (theoretical knowing) and *conocer* (actual knowing). Shetreet saw the shift to "actual" knowing as the crux of what it means to live globally, to avoid living separately and closed off from other people and cultures.

Shetreet furthermore proposed food as an example of a great global connector—an avenue for conversation, warmth, and nourishment that transcends cultures and results in actual knowing. She counted herself lucky to have connected through AUBG with so many people from different parts of the world over a good meal: friends from France, Egypt, Latvia, Lithuania, Spain, Poland, Jordan, Italy, Germany, Ethiopia, Bulgaria, and various parts of the U.S.A. They ate together, and they also studied, danced, celebrated, and kvetched, united by the common desire to learn more about each other

and the world they lived in, expanding their notion of neighborhood by redefining “human connections in ways that cut across geography, class, and culture” (Long 9).

Ada Long in her presidential address asked her NCHC Conference audience to consider how we might cultivate neighborly values and connect more broadly through our honors programs. The recent *Honors Abroad in Bulgaria* program, rooted in a partnership established between UMaine and AUBG decades ago, compelled honors students and faculty to interact with their wider neighborhood and to build upon cross-cultural relationships. Honors may be especially suited to this neighborly work with our CAT pedagogical strategies and our shared sense of honors identity that, as Long suggests, raises questions about positionality, intellectual privilege, and belonging. *Honors Abroad in Bulgaria* provided a unique international honors neighborhood through which to see with a new set of eyes; to experience alienation and develop compassion; to hear misunderstandings and imagine pathways to truth; to reflect upon biases and overcome preconceptions; and to actually know our global neighbors.

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