

MAPPING COMMUNITY COLLEGES AROUND THE WORLD

Comparative Perspectives and Collaborative Pathways



**An Enduring Relational Partnership: A 30-Year Global Collaboration
between McLennan Community College and Masaryk University**


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Sneak
Preview



The end of the Cold War in 1989 brought about a new era for the global exchange of ideas and commerce, and increased opportunities for international travel and relationship-building. Against this backdrop, a partnership developed between McLennan Community College (MCC), in Waco, Texas, and Masaryk University in Brno, Czechoslovakia (MUNI). As geopolitics have ebbed and flowed in the 30-plus years that MCC and MUNI have partnered together, our collaboration has evolved and continued to flourish, benefiting students and scholars alike. Human connections are at the heart of this success; what follows is an account of some of the ways such relationships have encouraged personal growth and strengthened a global partnership.

Beginning of a partnership


Celebrations for the 75th anniversary of the establishment of Masaryk University and curiosity prompted Dr. Dennis Michaelis, then-president of MCC, to travel to Brno with Dr. Bill Ovenshire, president of Hill College in 1994. Texas has the largest population of Czech descendants of any US state, and connections to Czech-Americans from central Texas, particularly the city of West, spurred his interest in visiting Czechoslovakia.

While in Brno, Michaelis attended ceremonies and met with MUNI administrators and faculty members. He connected with Dr. Jiri Hala, a nuclear physicist and textbook author who, in 1994, was serving as Rector of the Faculty of Education at MUNI. Michaelis invited Hala and another MUNI professor, Draha Blaha, along with their teenage daughters, Marketa and Carolina, to Texas in 1995. Hala and Blaha taught courses in Science and English. Marketa spent her freshman and sophomore years at MCC studying and perfecting her English. Carolina also studied at MCC. These initial visits provided opportunities to establish personal connections between the two institutions and created a pathway for faculty and student exchange to follow.

Faculty exchanges

MUNI was interested in developing business programs and needed professors with expertise in human resources, economics, and related fields. Jerry Jordan, Nancy Ray Mitchell, and Brooks Wilson from MCC's Business Department were some of the first MCC professors to teach at MUNI for a semester. While faculty at both institutions were committed to working together, there were various cultural and practical differences to navigate, such as differing expectations around gender roles and organizational efficiency, and different economic and business models underpinning faculty members' subject matter expertise.

Over the following 30 years, faculty exchanges expanded to include liberal arts. Business-focused exchanges continued, and professors from English, and Spanish also traveled to Brno, including Jennifer Black, Charlotte Laughlin, and Dan Paniagua. Art, English, and Education



Professors from MUNI traveled to Waco to teach, including Martin Svoboda and Ivan Maly (economics), Vladislav Muzik and Zdenek Janik (education) and Lucie Podrouzkova (English) among many others. Enduring friendships have grown from these exchanges along with insights into each other's culture, history, institutions, values, and daily experiences.

Students, part 1: Czechs in Texas

Marketa Halova and Carolina Blahova, the daughters of the MUNI leaders who initially visited MCC in 1995, enrolled at MCC as full-time international students in 1995-1996. Their time abroad significantly impacted the trajectory of their lives. Marketa, Jiri Hala's daughter, after a year at MCC, returned to MUNI to finish her degree. She then returned to Waco and completed an MBA at Baylor University. From there she moved to Boston where she met her husband. Marketa currently is a full professor at Skidmore College.


Not all the students from MUNI who have attended MCC over the years have settled in the States, but all have made lasting friendships and connections. In 2000, Gabriela Kolocovova came to study at MCC. She was interested in photography and rock-n-roll music. She played in a band and studied photography. After a year at MCC, she went on to complete her bachelor's degree at the University of North Texas and her MFA at the University of Houston. She returned to MCC to teach photography for several years before returning to Czechia.

Funding

Since 1995, MCC has hosted 69 Czech students, most for a semester at a time, though others have stayed for a full year. Students receive airfare and a stipend to cover some living expenses from MUNI. MCC provides scholarships and social support through the Presidential Scholars program, a competitive scholarship program for students with a 3.0 GPA or higher, awarded by the college president. The scholarship, funded through the MCC Foundation, provides tuition, fees, and funding to purchase instructional materials. The college also provides housing, technology, a bike for each student, and in the last few years, an Uber account. The students work on campus and take classes, making friends and forming long-lasting relationships with students, faculty and staff.

An Immersive Experience

The Czech students who study at MCC get an immersive experience of Texas culture. Each incoming MUNI student is assigned an MCC student liaison, or "ambassador." The ambassadors contact the incoming MUNI students, offer individual help, invite them to local events or their homes, provide transportation, and forge relationships that foster cross-cultural engagement, heightened learning, and deep engagement. One particularly active ambassador, Perla Reynoso, has facilitated travel for visiting MUNI students and helped them experience culture



in new ways. Perla has given them glimpses of Mexican-American cultural events, local sports and arts, and a look into her own family as she has shared her life experiences with them.

Additionally, MUNI students travel to Washington D.C., Philadelphia, and New York with MCC's Presidential Scholars and Honors College students as part of government and leadership courses. They also have opportunities to meet important figures in Central Texas, such as ambassadors, state senators and representatives, and leaders in education, business, and philanthropy.

The MUNI students who study and faculty who teach at MCC widen their understanding of politics, institutions, culture, and people. They have expanded their knowledge of child development, taking part in MCC's early childhood education program; participated in our expansive music and theater programs, performing and receiving private lessons; and have learned about ranching and US and Texas government through our agriculture and political science offerings. They also make a lasting impact on MCC students, faculty, and staff.

Students, part 2: Texans in Czechia

MCC students have traveled to Czechia in a variety of capacities, and for varying lengths of time – from several weeks to a full semester. Several business students spent a semester studying at MUNI, and three groups of students have gone to Czechia as part of a travel course through the Presidential Scholars program and the Honors College.

President Michaelis took the first group of MCC students in the late '90s. Another group of MCC Presidential Scholars traveled to MUNI in 2009. The students were able to interact with faculty and students at MUNI, forging bonds, expanding their understanding of the world, and learning the benefits of travel. A group traveled in 2023 (a trip had been planned for 2020 but was cancelled due to the pandemic), and the next trip took place in spring of 2025.

Currently, students from MCC (Presidential Scholars and Honors College students) who travel to Czechia are part of an interdisciplinary humanities course co-led by Drs. Zdenek Janik and Amy Antoninka. The course encourages self-reflection, intercultural competency development, critical thinking, and relationship building. Participating MCC students are paired with MUNI students early in the spring semester and work collaboratively on virtual projects that help them understand each other's culture. From peer-to-peer interaction they gain cultural sensitivity and understand cultural diversity. They grow in respect for one another while combining theoretical knowledge with real-world understanding of human situations. The increased empathy, open-mindedness, and appreciation of the rich tapestry of human experiences increases their capacity to navigate a global world.



Funding

The two biggest barriers to meaningful global engagement for MCC students are economic and experiential. Most of our students have had little travel experience; many have never left McLennan County or flown on a plane. Additionally, our students generally do not have the financial resources to travel. Thus, we have sought to keep the cost affordable to students; our president has raised funds from private donors to pay a significant portion of the students' costs. In order to make the trip meaningful, all students are required to pay a minimum of \$300, and for others who are able to pay more, costs range from an additional \$32 to \$1250. TPEG (Texas Public Educational Grants) awards have been used to cover about half of the students' costs while the Foundation funds make up the additional costs.

Student-centered collaboration

An additional barrier to travel for some MCC students is fear. Having travelled little, they often have anxiety about leaving home and being in another country. Creating relationships with MUNI students studying at MCC provides a way to start overcoming such feelings prior to travel, and provides a level of familiarity with the culture and context MCC students are entering. Additionally, the on-campus coursework that precedes the travel portion of the program promotes understanding of their peers in Brno. MCC and MUNI students work in virtual teams ("buddies") on assignments that encourage them to understand each other's culture in terms of "relationships, rituals, and restrictions." As these assignments progress the relationships that grow between the buddies help the students with that final barrier.

The MCC students' excitement grows over the course, and during the trip they gain firsthand knowledge of Czech history, art, music, politics, and society through a series of immersive and interactive workshops led by MUNI professors. They also experience Czechia's rich history, architecture, art, and culture through tours and field trips, and through the relationships with peers that were started during the semester.

Students' reflections after the trip are telling. In general, they report that they gained new appreciation for another culture; grew in self-confidence and self-reliance; developed problem-solving skills, adaptability, communication skills, and creativity; and moved beyond the place they were comfortable to develop themselves in new ways. They overcame fear and communication barriers, and became more confident, empathic, and adaptable. As Perla Reynoso, MCC ambassador for MUNI students who was then able to participate in the program at MUNI herself, reflected, "this was the first step to improving myself."



Relationships at the heart

From the beginning, learning, growing, and developing through relationships has been the root of the success of this global partnership. Everyone who has been part of the collaboration has been afforded the chance to gain intercultural competencies, develop tolerance and appreciation of different cultures, and build communication and critical thinking skills. Students, faculty, and all involved have had opportunities to broaden their perspectives and gain insights into global issues through teamwork and collaboration. The students involved are better prepared for a global job market; have gained skills and motivation, and experienced personal growth. The relational model used in this collaboration between MCC and MUNI makes these breakthroughs possible and strengthens our global partnership.

About the authors

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