



With the emphasis on sustainability at the UGA Costa Rica campus, students have the opportunity to participate in a variety of projects such as planting trees on campus and in the community. Pictured are students from the 2015 IPIIC course (L to R): Brittany Winbush, Camile Jones, Matt Chaiken (back row), Starky Thomas (back row), Rachel Huppertz (front row), Emilie Clarke, Alexandria Gonsalves.

## Global education

### Costa Rica course provides international perspectives on interracial communication.

**A** shared personal connection on campus brought communication studies professor Tina M. Harris into territory that was at the same time familiar and unfamiliar. The unfamiliar territory was Costa Rica; the familiar was interracial communication, Harris' specialty and an area in which she has actually co-authored the leading textbook.

Harris, a Josiah Meigs Distinguished Teaching Professor and multiple-award-winning faculty member in the department of communication studies in the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences, has taught her "International Perspectives on Interracial Communications" course at the UGA Costa Rica residential campus each summer since 2008.

To date about 90 students have completed the program. As many as 14 students each year engage in readings and class discussions about race and culture as they journey through different regions of Costa Rica, each with its own unique racial makeup and cultural heritage.



UGA students Daron Blankenship (left) and Rachel Huppertz in the 2015 summer IPIIC course learn about coffee and sugar cane harvest and production from Alvaro's Sustainable Farm Tours, which is located close to the UGA Costa Rica campus.

Each new student group brings their own personal histories, preconceived notions, fears, preferences and biases to the course. This not only makes each year's course unique but also requires Harris to juggle any group tensions with a consideration of how each student's own self-discovery and racial identity directly impacts his or her experience with the program.

"There's a lot of emotional labor that goes into the program," Harris said. "Some have some discomfort trying new food or question whether it's safe to drink the water, or there's discomfort with the hotel accommodations."

Then there are emotional reactions to the course material itself. For many, this is their first experience outside of the U.S. and the first time they've taken the time to listen to people from other races talk about their experiences and struggles, and to openly admit—and discuss—their preconceptions.

Harris occasionally has to address interpersonal and interracial conflict within the group, or help students identify coping strategies to deal with cultural immersion and a very unique group dynamic. Often the discussions result in the students becoming more aware of their biases and different methods of communication, which is one of the goals of the course.

Although Harris had never traveled to Costa Rica before she began planning her first course, she grew up in a military family that lived in Rota, Spain, for four and a half years, during which time Harris learned Spanish as a native speaker does—by being immersed in it.

"My mom recently joked that Spanish is my first language," Harris said.

Harris said that living in Spain "was the most amazing experience I've ever had in my entire life. It played a critical role in shaping my identity and the way I view differences in culture and ethnicity."

On the recommendation of a colleague in UGA's administration, Harris met with Quint Newcomer, director of UGA Costa Rica, to talk about diversifying the study abroad course offerings at the campus.

"Given my affinity for Spanish-speaking cultures and the opportunity that was presented to me, there was no way that I could say 'I'm not doing this,'" Harris said. "I've fallen in love with the country and the culture, and now when I go back it's like going home."

Costa Rica provides a rich laboratory for the students to see how race, ethnicity and culture function in another country. After starting the program on the UGA Costa Rica campus, the students spend six days in the capital city of San José, followed by six days in a predominantly Afro-Caribbean region known as Puerto Viejo.

"How race is constructed in Costa Rica is similar (to the U.S.), but different," Harris said.

Some places are much more like the U.S., such as San José, which is popular with tourists. Upon arriving in Puerto Viejo, however, students get



Student Starky Thomas, a participant in the 2015 IPIC course, visited a Costa Rican school near Puerto Viejo for a service-learning excursion. While at the school, UGA students decorated the school's columns, desks, chairs and benches, and then competed in a game of soccer — in which the Costa Rican children beat the Americans handily.



As part of a service-learning opportunity built into their course, students in the 2015 IPIC program visited a Costa Rican school near Puerto Viejo. The group asks the school to tell them how the UGA group can help the school, so they can focus their efforts on meaningful tasks rather than working on frivolous projects or donating items that are not needed. Pictured is student Aarika Znosko (center right) with one of the schoolchildren.

a true immersion into the culture through panel discussions and structured time with locals. Afterward, the students get a short break, which gives them the chance to regroup and refresh before returning to the UGA Costa Rica campus to present their research projects.

While she doesn't expect to see an immediate drastic change in her students in the three and a half weeks they are in Costa Rica, Harris has witnessed post-program transformations and awareness by remaining in touch with them months and years after the program has ended.

One student in particular provided a great example of this—although the student is of Puerto Rican descent, during class discussions she said she had always thought of herself as white. The course readings and discussions had her examining her own heritage more closely, however, and just a few weeks into the course, the student was self-identifying as Puerto Rican and discussing with her parents this transformative experience. Shortly after returning from Costa Rica, she became involved with a Puerto Rican student association, immersed herself in the culture and started speaking Spanish more regularly.

"This is what the program is about ... I want the students to have some self-discovery while they are on the program that is long lasting," Harris said.

— Sue Myers Smith, Office of International Education



While staying in Puerto Viejo, Costa Rica, students in the 2015 IPIC course learned how to make Pan Bon, a bread that looks similar to a cinnamon roll, from a local Afro-Caribbean woman whose family recipe has been passed down for generations. This local woman, Ms. Luba, has made a business out of not only selling the bread but also teaching visitors how to make it.

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