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A Classroom with a View: CBB-London offers students a window to the world

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Martin Andrucki, a Bates College professor of art, was talking about Oliver Cromwell and the repression of theater in England during the Reformation when he pointed over the heads of a dozen Colby, Bowdoin and Bates students, past a double-decker bus that was careening through London's Bloomsbury Square, and down toward The Strand a few blocks away. “There’s a place called The Temple Bar. Have you seen it?” he asked. “That’s the boundary between the City of London and Westminster.” It marks the line between the city, where theater and dancing were forbidden in the 1640s, and the West End—Westminster, Kensington, Mayfair and Soho—where, 350 years after Cromwell scowled at their sacrilegious play acting, theaters still thrive.

Welcome to the new CBB-London Center, part of an innovative consortium for international study pioneered by Colby, Bates and Bowdoin. Welcome to a portal through which Colby, Bates and Bowdoin students enter a brave old world.

By Stephen Collins ’74 • Photos by Brian Speer
One challenge in establishing the CBB center (above) has been to strike a balance—to offer the benefits of immersion in a foreign culture without sacrificing rigorous academic standards.

Andrucki had the students' focused attention on a Monday morning in mid-February. On Tuesday, students in the center's Modern and Contemporary British Literature and Culture cluster would resume their study of E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Group in a course titled Bloomsbury—Then and Now. A third cluster studying International Policy Issues would meet with Colby Professor of Government Kenneth Rodman, who was teaching European and American Relations.

For students in Andrucki’s course, clearly the play is the thing. As they settled in around the table, talk of the previous weekend’s activities was all about theater, never mind that during January and February they had seen Shakespeare, Beckett, an Italian classic and a couple of modern plays in weekly outings that are part of a Text and Performance class. “I waited two and a half hours and got some returned tickets for American Buffalo,” one student told his classmates, recapping the highlights of his weekend like a soccer player describing a spectacular goal. “And then I saw [actor] William H. Mason in a restaurant afterwards.”

“Hey. There’s a new Mamet play,” chimed in another student. “It’s a limited run March 14 through April 6. Anybody interested?”

Andrucki, interviewed after the class, said, “I’m in theater; London is the place to be. It’s totally different to sit in a class in Lewiston or Waterville and say, ‘What about Othello?’ Here we saw the Royal Shakespeare Company do Othello last week.”

Each group of students has its stories: first-semester comparative government students sitting on the British throne (while Parliament was out of session) and later visiting the Scottish Parliament in its inaugural year; the literature group visiting the haunts of and exhibits of art works by the Bloomsbury Group; the art and architecture in
London group both surrounded by and immersed in its topic; Rodman’s international policy group bound for Brussels to visit NATO headquarters.

“All the teachers here use London as a laboratory,” said Professor Jonathan Weiss, Colby’s associate dean of faculty and director of off-campus study.

American undergraduates are studying abroad in record numbers—114,000 of them at last count, or enough to fill 65 colleges Colby’s size. At Colby, the percentage of students overseas is among the highest in the nation, and more than 70 percent of Colby’s graduates in the past six years studied abroad in 59 different countries. They returned more aware, mature, focused and confident and with a more global perspective, professors report.

Living and studying in another culture often produces an epiphany; it awakens intellectual curiosity and a thirst for knowledge, and it instills in students both broad ideals and specific plans to make the world a better place.

Epiphanies and worldly experience notwithstanding, the study abroad business is not without pitfalls. International programs for college students have proliferated but without a comprehensive set of standards. Programs vary in the degree to which they are well planned and academically rigorous. Traditionally, some students have seen international study as a respite from the serious work required on campus—a chance to take a trip and earn credit.

Colby has taken international study very seriously, both in promoting it as a powerful part of the undergraduate experience and in ensuring that students aren’t just off on a joyride. “We are very restrictive in terms of where we allow students to study; much more so than many of our peers,” said Weiss, who has directed the Off-Campus Study Office since 1989. “A lot of programs simply don’t meet our standards.”

The challenge has been to strike a balance—to offer the benefits of immersion in a foreign culture without sacrificing the rigorous academic standards that Colby, Bates and Bowdoin faculties expect in their own courses. The three colleges decided to try to have their scones and eat them too. In January 1998, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded Colby, Bates and Bowdoin $850,000 to develop study-away programs together as a consortium.

The CBB-London Center and the CBB-Quito Center in Ecuador opened in the fall of 1999; another in Cape Town, South Africa, will open this coming fall. The centers are staffed in part by CBB faculty members, and their programs of study maintain academic standards consistent with the three Maine campuses. At Colby, the CBB centers are the only study-abroad programs whose grades count toward grade-point averages.

Each of the three colleges owns and operates one of the three centers. The college presidents decided that Colby would establish the CBB-London Center, Bates CBB-Quito and Bowdoin CBB-Cape Town. Colby moved from temporary quarters last fall to the permanent CBB-London Center on Bloomsbury Square starting in January. An open house and dedication of the London center was held in March.

Andrea Morris, administrative director of the center, who has been involved with foreign study programs in London for years, said students from other American programs in the city were envious of the facilities and

The center is conveniently located near the theater district and Parliament (above). “All the teachers here use London as a laboratory,” said Jon Weiss, Colby’s director of off-campus study.
Students in the center’s inaugural year gave it rave reviews as well. “I have nothing but praise for it,” said Rob Henzi ’01, who was in the first-semester comparative government program. While Americans rarely get access to the top professors when they enroll in foreign universities, he said, “you really can’t complain when [Colby’s Distinguished Presidential Professor of American Government G. Calvin] Cal Mackenzie is teaching two of your courses.”

Despite being in the comparative politics curriculum, Henzi said, “I kind of latched onto the theater class, because there were always extra tickets.” Besides taking in plays he visited museums and particularly liked The Tate. Hyde Park is near the student flats, he said, so he and other students would take blankets and books there to study.

Bowdoin junior Adam Wong and Colby’s Justin Paré ’01 and Jarrod Dumas ’01, all at the center for the spring semester, said many students see international study as a bit of a “free ride.” But they were eager to contrast that perception with their own experiences in the CBB-London program.

Mackenzie said his students took advantage of the opportunities that the city presented—rock and jazz clubs, theater, pubs and museums. They also took advantage of inexpensive flights (under $100 round trip) to Mediterranean countries. But, he said, there came a point in the semester when they realized they had papers to write and exams to pass and that the work was comparable to what they would expect back in Maine. “The big thing about these programs,” Mackenzie said, “is that the students get grades that count. If not, they might bail and go off to Italy at the end of the semester.”

Because the academic program is so demanding, the center anticipates many of the students’ needs and takes care of odds and ends that might take an inordinate amount of students’ time if they had to work out the details. The center leases a group of furnished flats near Hyde Park in a neighborhood with a large Arab population. It has a relationship with a bank for establishing accounts, and it provides tickets for transportation on the London Underground, for example. So instead of using their spare time on a longer commute or trying to get a plumber, students are likely to head for the British Museum, almost next door to the center, even if it’s just for an hour, said Mackenzie.

**A New Family Member But Not Without Birthing Pains**

The handbook that students get when they enroll in the CBB-London Center says: “There is a great misperception that somehow British culture is similar to American culture, which creates problems for the unprepared.” Words of wisdom not lost on Jon Weiss, Colby’s associate dean of faculty and director of off-campus studies. For it was on Weiss’s shoulders that responsibility for setting up the CBB-London Center landed.

“I’m an academic,” said Weiss. “I’ve never done anything like this.” His role in the CBB consortium is “line manager” in London, he said. “I don’t even know what that means.”

In the two years leading up to the dedication of the CBB-London Center this March, Weiss had to establish Colby’s first-ever subsidiary corporation—Colby College-U.K. Ltd.—sign piles of documents whose depth he described in feet and petition a British court for an exemption to the British Landlords and Tenants Act of 1952. He had the 200-year-old building renovated to Colby’s specifications. And Weiss did it all despite the fact that initially he couldn’t get anyone in London to pay attention to a group of upstart colonials, he said. “Trying to get the Brits to take us seriously was very difficult.”

For Weiss, managing the project from five time-zones away presented additional challenges, and he heaps praise on the two women who have served as administrative directors of the center—Jennifer Gammell, who laid the groundwork and got the place up and running, and Andrea Morris, who currently manages day-to-day business at the center and handles emergencies from plugged loso to injured students. Morris, a Zimbabwean transplant, is gregarious, enthusiastic and unceasingly helpful. “She’s more like a sister than a mother hen,” said one student.

Weiss’s efforts created a modern academic center inside a historic building with a prestigious London address. The five-story center has classrooms, a small library, faculty offices, study rooms and a break room. It contains its own computer network with personal computers for student and faculty use. Out the back window is a courtyard that abuts the Duke of Bedford’s private gardens. Half a block west is the British Museum; a few blocks south is Covent Garden; students ride the London Underground to Holburn Station, two blocks east of the center.

“It was an enormous adventure for me,” Weiss said. “It took me into areas I’d never been.” It was also the capstone of his 10 years as director of off-campus studies. Next year he returns to full-time active duty in the French Department, where he will be the NEH Class of 1940 Distinguished Professor in Humanities.
The center also provides a valuable support system when things go wrong, as they sometimes do. In February a Colby student was hit by a taxi as he crossed the street, and he spent a night in the public health-care hospital. The following day Morris arranged treatment through a private physician and facilitated the student’s return to the U.S. for follow-up care.

Faculty participation is another innovation in the CBB collaborative. Professors from all three schools serve on steering committees for the programs, and those who want to teach at the centers submit proposals for units they would run in London, Quito or Cape Town. Competition for the positions has been so stiff that it has come down to “tough choices” selecting among all of the programs that professors have proposed, Weiss said.

Having the faculty broadly engaged and invested in the CBB programs should better integrate the study-abroad experience with what goes on back on the Maine campuses, says Colby President Bill Cotter. That’s been a goal of his—to make sure that pre-travel preparation and post-travel follow-up maximize the value of a student’s

While some performing arts classes (right) are held at The Drill Hall, a couple of blocks away, many classes are held at the Center.

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Noting Nick Nolte
Students Abroad and Their Strange Encounters

The February 24 Colby Echo ran a story, excerpted below, about some Colby students who had unusual experiences abroad first semester.

As many February freshmen and juniors discovered last semester, spending time off Mayflower Hill brings all sorts of surprises, and you never know who you’ll end up running into.

While walking home with friends from her internship in a ritzy area of central London, Stephanie McMurrich ’01 spotted a man who appeared to be homeless. “He had an old ratty trench coat, frazzled hair and bottles in his pocket,” McMurrich said. As the man turned, McMurrich thought he bore a striking resemblance to actor Nick Nolte. A bystander heard her arguing with her friends over the stranger’s identity and cut in to solve the conflict. “That is Nick Nolte. He lives right around here.”

McMurrich had another strange experience while waiting for a train from Venice to Rome. A young man appeared confused. “In English, I asked him if he needed help. He wanted to know what time the train was leaving, so I told him. He spoke with an accent, so I asked him where he was from. Without hesitating and with a straight face, he said, ‘I am from—ing Bulgaria?’ It was hilarious and random coming from someone who clearly had little knowledge of the English language.” McMurrich sat with her new friend for the eight-hour ride.

As Devon Douglas ’03 passed the British Museum, she did a double take. The Queen of England was walking into the museum. “She was so little and so cute,” said Douglas. “She was wearing a red outfit and everyone else was wearing black. She was walking in with the Chinese president for the opening of an exhibit about archaeological digs in China. There were Free Tibet protesters everywhere and people were getting arrested.”

On a trip to New Zealand from Australia, where she was studying, Emily Mahlman ’01 ran low on money. She missed her return flight and found herself stranded. “I finally hopped a cab to get back to the airport,” said Mahlman. “But I didn’t have enough money to pay for it. I only had $20, and the cab fare was $30.” Fearing a confrontation, Mahlman was saved when her cab driver found out she was a Colby student. He had a brother-in-law from Waterville. “I asked him to bring me to an ATM, but he wouldn’t,” said Mahlman. Instead the driver said, “It’s okay, any Colby student is fine in my cab,” and let her off the hook.

—Bliss Woolmington ’02
experience abroad. It's not unique to have resident faculty in study-abroad programs, Cotter says. But the level of control that CBB faculty have in setting up the programs they will teach at the center is unprecedented.

The same value that students receive from international experience accrues to the professors as well. "There is no way you can read about or describe another culture without living in it," said Cotter, who lived and worked in Nigeria and Colombia and traveled extensively in Africa before coming to Colby in 1979. Living abroad, one notices the differences in how people organize their lives, how poverty and class structures affect individuals and nations, Cotter says. It gives students and faculty a view of their own country as seen by the non-Americans they encounter. International experience prepares students for the increasingly interactive and cooperative global economy, and the insights gained tend to make people better U.S. citizens when they return to America, he said.

Despite Colby's efforts to provide the best faculty, facilities and student services in the world on its own campus in Waterville, students frequently cite the semester they spent abroad as the experience that transformed them. If a less-than-rigorous study-abroad program compromises the value of that international experience, it's an opportunity at least partially wasted. Now, with the CBB program blending the three schools' academic standards with the catalyst of world experience, the full promise of international education is likely to be fulfilled for increasing numbers of Colby, Bates and Bowdoin students.

Reflecting on Colby
A Rhodes Scholar at Oxford

For Will Polkinghorn '99 "study abroad" means two years at Oxford University in England as Colby's latest Rhodes Scholar.

Polkinghorn was the kid from Santa Monica who was getting Cs and D's in high school until he was treated for Attention Deficit Disorder. At Colby he made up for lost time, winning a Rhodes in January of his senior year and graduating as valedictorian with a double major in chemistry and religion.

Colby caught up with Polkinghorn in Oxford in February. He admits he's taking it somewhat easier at Oxford after having worked extremely hard for four years at Colby. He's studying politics, philosophy and economics at Brasenose College, one of the 45 colleges that comprise Oxford University, and for his efforts he will receive a second bachelor's degree. He has been accepted at Harvard Medical and plans to go there after two years at Oxford.

At Brasenose he meets with his tutors—faculty members—one-on-one to read them his papers. But the student-faculty relationship doesn't extend beyond the classroom, he says. Colby's take-a-professor-to-lunch program, where the Dean of Students Office will pay for meals to encourage Colby students and faculty to get together informally, would be an alien notion at Oxford. Oxford faculty and students dine in the same hall every evening, but at separate tables. The meal is called "high table" because the dons eat on an elevated platform, separate from the students.

"Colby has so many great professors," Polkinghorn said, recalling how accessible to and engaged with students they are. The facilities at Colby are better than what he has seen at Oxford. "Brasenose just built a graduate center that has Ethernet connections, which is almost unheard of here," he said.

Many of Polkinghorn's friends at Oxford are Rhodes scholars from South Africa, Canada and the U.S. The "colonials" have difficulty assimilating into the British students' world. In hindsight, Polkinghorn said, "If I had Colby to do over again, I would try to get to the extra mile to get to know the international students."

But listing differences that he has observed between the British and the American schools isn't to suggest that Polkinghorn is unhappy or un-awed at Oxford. First semester he played host to Colby, Bates and Bowdoin students from the CBB-London Center and spent a day proudly showing them Oxford's campuses, some dating to the 12th century. He showed them courtyards so old that sundials were essential because clocks hadn't been invented. He pointed out "modern" additions designed by Christopher Wren. There were portraits of famous alumni like John Locke and Lewis Carroll and silver beer goblets in daily use in his dining hall since the 1660s.

Even his college's peculiar name has a colorful story dating to medieval times. Brasenose College is so called because a brass doorknocker in the shape of a nose with a ring through it hung on the main door. The knocker bestowed good luck; anyone who could wrap his fingers around it would be offered asylum from the authorities. But in 1334 it was stolen by rebel students. "It took the college five centuries to follow its nose to Stamford [in Lincolnshire], where in 1890 it regained the famous knocker by buying up the girls school to which it then belonged," according to college history.