

# MOBILIZING EDUCATION

**A tri-country program crosses borders, language barriers and institutions to enhance teaching and learning in North America.**

When Canadian student Glenn Mutsemaker showed up for class at a small university in central Mexico last year, he had only rudimentary Spanish and little knowledge of the country.

But for the 25-year-old interior design major from St. Albert, Alberta, the initial “nerve-wracking” introduction gave way to excitement, as he picked up the language and made new friends. Soon, he discovered something of himself—and of Canada’s place on the continent.

“It’s life changing in ways you don’t even notice at first,” he says of his semester at the Universidad de Guanajuato, five hours north of Mexico City. Staying with a local family in the small town, for example, he found a different world, where people were happy living a “pared-

down lifestyle” in close proximity to others.

Mutsemaker is convinced that his experience will make him a better interior designer when he graduates from Mount Royal College in Calgary next year. Already, he’s deepened his understanding of North America. “Even though we are so different, it always shines through how much the same we are.”

Mutsemaker’s experience is what education officials from Canada, the



Life changing: Student Glenn Mutsemaker (centre, shown on a bus trip with classmates,) found a semester at the Universidad de in Guanajuato in Mexico helped him to discover something of himself—and of Canada’s place on the continent.

United States and Mexico had in mind when they set up the Program for North American Mobility in Higher Education in 1995. The program finances groups of colleges and universities—two each from each country—to collaborate on theme-based projects built around student exchanges and curriculum development by faculty. This allows participants to cross borders, overcome language barriers and attend foreign institutions, both public and private, with a view to enhancing teaching and learning in North America.

In the past nine years, more than 1,000 Canadian students from 80 colleges and universities have participated in projects linking them with counterparts in Mexico and the U.S., in areas of study ranging from agribusiness and architecture to multicultural perspectives in education.

In a recent evaluation, the Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration, a continent-wide education network, gave the mobility program top marks

for enhancing student learning, preparing young people for the global economy and developing cross-border cooperation among institutions.

“If a country wants to be a key player in the international arena, its people need key skills and international experience,” says Francisco Marmelejo, executive director of the 250-member consortium.

The Canadian government, through Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), contributes \$1.6 million annually to the program. This enables nearly 200 Canadian students each year to undertake part of their studies in another North American country, with an equal number of foreign students coming to Canada. At the end of their study period, Canadian students return home with valuable international expertise, while earning full academic credit from their home institution. Says Christiane Boulanger, coordinator of the program at HRSDC, “These experiences are an excellent indicator for future employers of



Street scene in Guanajuato, Mexico.

photo: courtesy of Glenn Mutsemaker