

Bringing the World Home

*Students from Albania to Zimbabwe
Make Their Mark on an American Campus*

Editor's Note: If the story about Davis-UWC Scholars intrigues you but you would like a better sense of what's going on with these students at Colby, consider this model feature story as a resource. It gives some of the texture of the interaction among students and describes how Shelby Davis's plan is actually playing out on campus. It also includes compelling stories about where some the students come from and what they have learned—and taught—at one of America's top liberal arts colleges.

Waterville, Maine – It's late morning in a lecture hall at Colby College. Students in the front row of Professor Kenneth Rodman's class on international relations lean forward in their seats, unusually rapt as Rodman lectures about the ongoing argument over who wins and who loses in an increasingly globalized economy.

From their intent expressions, you'd think these students in Waterville, Maine, had a stake in the fate of developing nations—and they do.

Rodman directs his first question to Igor Gnyp, a sophomore from the Ukraine. Another question goes to Megha Kapoor, a freshman in economics from Indonesia. There's a follow-up query from Canadian Justin Dubois, a challenge from Emma James, who is from New Zealand, and a contribution about multinational corporations from Andras Rozmer of Hungary.

Karin Shankar, a first-year student from India, responds to another of Rodman's questions, this one about the plight of developing countries that are overly reliant on just a few raw materials. She explains that becoming "more productive" in exporting raw materials may actually be counterproductive, because increased supply often results in depleted natural resources, falling prices and economic hardship. American and foreign students alike seem to listen more intently because they know that Shankar grew up in the developing world they're all talking about.

More and more this is the scene at Colby, largely due to an aggressive recruitment effort by the college. It's also a consequence of an unusual and effective alliance among the college, a private college preparatory program open to students from all over the world and a generous donor who connected the dots by putting up millions of dollars to support students at both institutions.

Shelby Davis, founder of a \$30-billion mutual fund and money management firm, is a \$55-million backer of United World College, an international school with 2,000 students around the world. Two years ago he added a commitment to underwrite up to the full cost of a four-year college education for any graduate of the UWC program admitted to one of five American universities and colleges (Colby, Middlebury and Wellesley colleges, College of the Atlantic, and Princeton University).

Colby's international student population boomed, numbers doubling in just the past four years, largely because of the Davis-UWC scholarship program. Twelve percent of the Class of 2006, which arrives on campus in late August, will be international students, counting non-resident foreign students, dual citizens and resident aliens.

WORLD VIEWS

The benefits of having rising numbers of international students on campus are already clear, according to faculty members and students alike. Some faculty members and students even argue that their presence confers more benefits on their American classmates than on the scholarship recipients themselves.

"These international students, especially the UWC graduates, make a considerable contribution to the intellectual caliber of discussion in my classes," says Rodman. "They expose American students to quite diverse points of view and challenge the stale liberal-conservative split that dominates American political thought."

Rodman offers two examples of the kinds of exchanges that spring from having multinational, multicultural students in his classes. "I had a Brazilian in my class, a very conservative pro-business guy. One day this American classmate with similar views began referring to Latin American oil, this resource, as 'our oil.'" The result was what Rodman calls "an educational clash."

In another recent class, an American feminist raised questions about the prevalence of female genital mutilation in some countries. "She raised the issue, with some passion, as a human rights issue," Rodman says. "But an African feminist in the class, who shared many similar beliefs, really went after the American student about her ethnocentric cultural assumptions. And that led to a revealing exchange between them.

"Those are exactly the kinds of dialogues which are critically important to preparing our students for the world they're inheriting. You wouldn't have those exchanges if the international students weren't here," Rodman argues.

Domestic students at Colby agree. "The international scholars add to the diversity of the student body," says Kate Heidemann, a junior from Connecticut, explaining why she supports increasing their numbers at Colby. "Every single international student I've met brings a lot to the table."

Heidemann's example? "I was in an anthropology class where we watched a film about civil wars in Africa. The film was full of violent images, and we could all agree that what we were seeing was a tragedy. But sitting next to me was one of

my friends from Zimbabwe, and he was crying through the whole thing. This kind of direct contact brings everything alive. You're never going to get that from a textbook."

For American students who have never traveled overseas, the growing population of international students on campus has proven especially exciting. "I grew up in Maine, and I never got farther than Quebec in high school," says Catherine Fillebrown, who is majoring in East Asian studies. "If you can't afford to travel, it's great to have people brought to you. The amazing thing is this: Here are all these students from Africa, India, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe. I hadn't seen the world before coming to college, but in a way Colby brought the whole world to me."

THE DAVIS-UWC CONNECTION

Colby's determination to "bring the whole world" to campus made it a natural partner for United World College, a college preparatory program with students from 140 countries on 10 campuses around the world. In 1998 Davis donated \$40 million to fund 100 scholarships for American students enrolled on UWC campuses and to repair facilities at the UWC campus in New Mexico. In the wake of terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, he pledged \$10 million more. Davis's subsequent funding of college-level scholarships for UWC graduates, begun two years ago but enlarged substantially just this year, was a logical extension of his earlier gifts.

"What Shelby Davis has done is to create a private-sector Fulbright program for kids from all over the world," says Philip Geier, president of United World College USA in New Mexico. Geier points out that since many UWC graduates come from families with extremely limited incomes, they wouldn't be able to attend UWC in the first place, or go on to college in the United States, without scholarship support. (International students are not eligible for most kinds of need-based financial aid at U.S. colleges and universities.)

The Davis financial commitment ought to be a model for other philanthropists and the universities and colleges they support, Geier suggests. "Shelby Davis wanted to establish these programs, but he also wanted to challenge schools to realize that it's in their own strategic interest to transform themselves," Geier says. "As they've seen at Colby, you can leverage quite a bit of change over a short period of time by bringing these enormously qualified students to small- and medium-sized colleges."

With anti-American sentiment running high worldwide, Geier argues that the presence of UWC-Davis scholars also could serve as a kind of antidote. "Americans need to be out there in the world in ways that transform perceptions and attitudes about the United States—in northern Europe, in south Asia, in Latin America and everywhere you can imagine," Geier adds. "We Americans are not doing that enough. This effort by Shelby Davis is a linchpin example of taking up the slack."

FACULTY ENTHUSIASM

The benefits of this innovative scholarship program are felt by students and faculty alike.

David Findlay, an economics professor, former chair of the economics department and a Colby faculty member for the past 17 years, says the international students raise the intellectual level on campus. "There's an energy and drive among the international students that's quite inspiring," Findlay says. "They ask questions I hadn't anticipated and they really dig into the material. They encourage other students to aim higher academically."

Parker Beverage, Colby's dean of admissions, says this was precisely the intention of his staff's recruiting efforts, which brought 39 UWC-Davis scholars to the campus during the past two years and has 30 more starting classes this fall. "The presence of these international students broadens the horizons of our domestic students," Beverage says. Other faculty members concur. "Their presence isn't just important, as some might expect, because they add something 'exotic' to the mix of the student body," says Peyton R. Helm, whose "best student by far" in a classics course he taught last year was one of the UWC-Davis scholars. "They add intellectual *firepower*," Helm says.

Dasan Thamattoor, an assistant professor of chemistry, reports that most of the international students he's taught, even in his most difficult courses have been stellar. The international students are unusually "driven and extremely motivated" in ways that inspire their American classmates, he adds. "Having more of them is a real asset to Colby, which would otherwise be a significantly homogenous campus."

Thamattoor cites the example of Rodwell Mabaera, who grew up in Chinhoyi, Zimbabwe, and attended Colby on a scholarship from the Oak Foundation, which provides scholarships to students from Zimbabwe and Denmark and to other students whose families have suffered political oppression or torture. A double major in chemistry and math, Mabaera graduated summa cum laude in just three years.

Thamattoor says he noticed early on that Mabaera, one of a dozen African students on campus, continually signed up for “the hardest classes imaginable, becoming a kind of elder statesman” among classmates of all sorts. In addition to his extraordinary academic accomplishments, Mabaera ran on the cross-country team, played on an indoor soccer team with American and international students and faculty members, and was a trip leader for Colby’s outdoor orientation trips for incoming freshmen. In August Mabaera entered the M.D. program at Dartmouth Medical School.

Increasing numbers of international students also have turned up in classes taught in Colby’s renowned Government Department. In courses about the intricacies of U.S. government, international scholars win high marks from top faculty. There’s no better way than taking these courses, faculty members argue, for foreign students to gain a deep understanding of the American political system.

G. Calvin Mackenzie, a professor of government, says the presence of international students is incalculable. “I had a student from Argentina in my course this last year when the economy collapsed,” Mackenzie recalled. “He could tell his classmates, in much more vivid terms than I ever could, what a suddenly worthless currency means for a hard-working family.”

Mackenzie worries, though, that future changes in national policy, inspired by security concerns, will make it more difficult for international students to study in this country. In the aftermath of the terrorist attack on September 11, Mackenzie notes, there’s been understandable attention paid to the potential risks posed by international study programs. (One of the attackers was in the United States on a student visa.)

There has been far less discussion of the other side of the story, Mackenzie argues. “If we make it significantly harder for foreign students to come to study on U.S. campuses, we’ll substantially diminish the educational experience of American students who learn from them,” he adds. “We will also destroy the great potential we have, through our colleges and universities, to make just the kinds of positive connections with young people in other countries that we need to make if we’re to raise levels of mutual understanding and combat future terrorism.”

THE WORLD AT COLBY

Late in the afternoon, between last classes and cafeteria dinners, more than a dozen Davis-UWC scholars gather to talk—as their colleagues had been doing in smaller meetings all day—about the particular challenges of being an international student on an American campus in these times. Students from 13 countries and five continents, representing a *mélange* of cultures and backgrounds, mix it up, amplifying on one another’s points and occasionally clashing. Several of the international students admit that they were mystified when they arrived on campus because of what they considered peculiar behavior by some of their American classmates. Alcohol abuse, especially among first-year students, and casual sexual activity, shocked several of the international scholars. Instead of breaking down barriers, initial impressions sometimes reinforced stereotypes.

“Some of these kids only care about Abercrombie and Fitch and using daddy’s ATM card,” says a student from India. Another remembers her first view of “this vast conveyor belt of all the food” available in the cafeterias at dinnertime, and the massive quantities of leftovers piled into the trash afterward. “It was a shock,” she says, “to really see for the first time this use-and-throw-away culture.”

Some of them were perplexed in the beginning when confronted with hostility or ignorance from a few American classmates. The first question a scholar from the Ukraine was asked by his roommate was: “Are your parents communists or are they part of the Mafia?” Another recalls an argument with her American classmate, who insisted vehemently that “Poland was, without a doubt, the capital of Czechoslovakia—so one country is supposed to be the capital of another country, you know, one in addition that no longer exists.”

After several similar examples, though, one of the Davis-UWC scholars protests. “I think we’re creating a misleading impression,” argues Diego Puig, a sophomore from Argentina. “This idea that Americans are ignorant—I think that’s complete crap.” He’s met plenty of Americans on campus who are smart, engaged, and open, he adds. If an American sudden dropped into his own hometown in Argentina, after all, he wouldn’t necessarily be greeted with enthusiasm, Puig points out, so why should the international students at Colby expect special treatment?

It’s up to the international students, Puig says softly, to break out of “the bubble” they sometimes find themselves in. Like other graduates of United World College, where community service is emphasized, he’s a volunteer in a nearby town where he donates time as an instructor in a public elementary school that can’t afford to hire a Spanish teacher. Reaching across national lines in efforts like this one will “deepen our understanding of American culture,” Puig says.

Going abroad for college not only offers an opportunity to understand American politics and culture better but also a chance to reflect on one's own background and experience. Elizebeta Gorgoska, who comes from Macedonia, credits her two years at UWC's Norway campus with altering previously strong views. "Back home I very rarely see an Albanian," she says, by way of example. "We're so separated from one another there, even though we live in the same country. Going to UWC and actually meeting Muslims, Africans, every kind of people that I'd never seen before and that I had prejudices about—that was incredible. It changed my view of the world."

An Arab student had a similar experience at his UWC campus in New Mexico. His neighbor in the dorm was an Israeli who is now part of the military forces occupying Palestinian territory. They have managed to stay in touch by e-mail, maintaining a friendship that they understand would be volatile news back home.

In a series of heart-breaking exchanges, the Arab student's Israeli friend confessed profoundly mixed feelings about his own role in the military. "I have seen hate of the strongest kind," the Israeli wrote in a recent e-mail. "Since I was post commander, I had to prevent sick people and pregnant women from getting to the hospital. Palestinians my dad's and granddad's age got down on their knees in front of me so that I will let them through... I got stuck in the middle of it. It's all very ugly and I don't think it's going to get any better."

Friendships such as these at Colby break down stereotypes for the next generation, according to the student. "For me, it's been a constant learning experience during the past three years," he says. If he'd stayed in the Middle East for high school and college, he might never have even met an Israeli. It was in the United States that an Israeli became one of his closest friends. "I learned my Hebrew on the way to the Grand Canyon," he says

Similar cross-cultural exchanges at Colby regularly yield unexpected insights. Stanislav Presolski, a freshman from Bulgaria, recalls an epiphany that struck him last fall during a course on English composition taught by Professor Cedric Gael Bryant. "That class was hard, the hardest thing I've ever done," Presolski remembers. "I was forced to look at things in many different ways."

Presolski remembers working on essays for the class on several nights from "8 o'clock in the evening until 8 o'clock in the morning," and researching extensively in preparation. "I wrote one essay about the gypsies in Bulgaria," he recalls. "It's a hidden conflict, almost like racism. Back home, when I was reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, I would say, 'Wow, see how Americans are so cruel in their treatment of black people.' But I had never questioned myself, or considered that I had the same kind of bad opinion of the gypsies. When I wrote that essay, I had to think things through more objectively."

A TWO-WAY STREET

The value of such cross-cultural exchange runs in both directions, of course. Ana Prokic, of Yugoslavia, for example, arrived at Colby College in the fall of 2000. Within a few months, U.S.-led NATO troops were bombing Belgrade. "I was watching the live broadcast and they said on television that the military hospital where my mom works had been destroyed," Prokic remembers. "I knew my mom was on 24-hour duty that day. It took me six hours to get through on the telephone to find out it wasn't the hospital but the building next to it that had been hit."

Several American students that Prokic didn't know well at the time were supportive through the difficult weeks that followed. She says she won't forget their kindness. Her classmates' responses to her own personal crisis, in turn, informed her own reaction when she returned home for vacation last December after the September 11 attacks. "The whole experience broke down stereotypes," Prokic says. "I'm sad to admit that I have friends who came up to me when I returned home over Christmas and said they'd had a party in front of the television set on September 11. People blame the U.S. for the bombing in my country, and so they celebrated the attacks.

"I said, 'Can you hear yourself? Listen, it's not Bill Clinton, it's not the pilots who bombed our country that died, it's two or three thousand innocent people!' Watching the bombing of my country was really *really* hard. But I was also here for the September 11 attacks and when that happened I felt the same exact pain that I'd felt when I saw buildings crash back home."

International students at Colby say they've frequently found themselves in a startling, and unique, position during the past year. Several likened their new challenge to a kind of navigation between the world inhabited by family and friends at home and the world of classmates and professors in the United States.

"I've become a kind of interpreter between the American perspective and Polish perspective—an interpreter in both directions," says Pawel Brodalka of Poland. Brodalka, a sophomore, is on the Colby track team. He rooms with an

“outspoken conservative” from New Jersey. “I’m fine with that. He’s an intelligent fellow,” Brodalka notes. “He’s got his strong views, but he’s not close-minded and he’s willing to listen to my views too.”

Since the terrorist attacks a year ago, Brodalka says he’s gotten used to playing this unusual role. “To my roommate and for the guys on the track team, I found myself to a certain extent able to explain why America is sometimes viewed as isolationist and unilateralist in its actions,” Brodalka explains. “And to my friends and family in Poland, I was able to explain just how frightened people are because those planes crashed into the World Trade Center.”

What did Brodalka say to his friends and family in Poland? “I told them the country is no monolith, and that it’s not as if everybody is against the Muslims now,” he says. “I told them that people are smart, and that they understand that you should not generalize and play into stereotypes.”

Brodalka also finds his own attitudes shifting as a result of such frank exchanges that spill out of the classroom only to be pursued during workouts, at meal times and in the dorms. “Most of my life I found myself strongly pro-Palestinian,” he says, offering an example. “Now when I listen to my conservative roommate and other American friends I find my perceptions shaken. I hope they find their perceptions shaken, too, in listening to me.”

THE LONGER VIEW

Charles Data hustles down the steps of Miller Library, stepping gingerly around clumps of freshly fallen snow. He raises his eyebrows and turns his hands up as if to ask: What’s this all about? It never snows in April where he comes from; he’s never lived anywhere quite so cold. Data is hurrying to his on-campus job at the Colby College Post Office, his time for work wedged between classes and a blizzard of academic obligations and volunteer activities that keep his schedule packed. Like many international students here, he also works up to 20 hours a week to supplement his scholarship funds. Like few others, he sends almost all of what he makes to his family back home.

Data, a second-year student this fall with a special interest in economics, was born in the Sudan and grew up in Uganda. He’s one of 10 UWC-Davis Scholars from Africa at Colby. When he talks about his trajectory, from Uganda to the United World College campus in Norway to Colby College in northern Maine, he says he’s “as surprised as anyone else to find myself here.” Born into a poor family (his mother works a small agricultural plot, his father lives in a refugee camp), Data was encouraged by his older brother to seek out better educational opportunities outside of Uganda.

He admits that he suffered a wallop of culture shock when he first arrived in Waterville a year ago. It might have been even harder to make the adjustment, he adds, if he hadn’t had two years of preparation—academic and social—at the United World College campus in Norway.

Even so, at first Data was thrown off by American customs. He wasn’t sure, for example, what to make of the cheery, but seemingly empty greetings that were shouted out at him around the campus. “I didn’t know whether Americans were all fake,” he recalls thinking. “People just seemed to be speaking at high speed—saying, ‘Hi, wuzzup!’—but it becomes very confusing to know whether they were at all interested in an answer to the question they were asking.” Over the next several months, Data broke through some of the isolation he’d felt and settled in to a new life at Colby. Like many of the other international students, he says that the small classes and close individual attention from professors helped get him over the hump.

There were cultural, as well as academic, challenges to adapting to his new life, Data says. The relatively open attitude toward homosexuality on campus, for example, initially startled him. He’d feared being placed with a gay roommate and took some time warming up to openly gay and lesbian classmates. Attitudes about homosexuality in Uganda are so different, he explains.

But Data experienced a dramatic change of heart over the course of his first year. His supervisor at the Post Office was a gay man. “He treated me respectfully,” Data says. “I really liked him. And that made me wonder why I should have disrespectful thoughts about gay people on the whole. I just began to let my prejudice go.”

As he settles into his second year now, Data is keenly aware of his special status—both at Colby and back at home. His unusual opportunity inspires a strong sense of responsibility. “I feel that I’m taking the resources of fifteen people’s education by being here—it’s all being devoted to me,” Data says softly. “And that raises quite important questions for the rest of my life. I have to think where I’m going to end up, and also how am I going to do something to compensate the other fifteen people who were sacrificed so I could be here?”

Data hopes to work for the United Nations, helping run resettlement programs. Eventually, he says, he’d like to go into politics in his native Sudan.

This combination of a sense of social responsibility and political obligation seems to define the UWC-Davis scholars at Colby. Emma James, a student from New Zealand who spent her high school years at the United World College campus in India, says that she shares Data's "sense of incredible privilege."

Nodding in the direction of classrooms, manicured grounds, gleaming dorms, she mentions a number of classmates from UWC who didn't have the money to go to university, either abroad or at home. James knows that it sounds a little corny to say so, but she feels their presence.

"When I walk into Colby's three dining halls where you have a choice of 93 different main courses, I have to catch myself and think about what would be on offer in India or New Zealand," she says. "Every single day, I think, My God, Mr. Davis has given me the most incredible opportunity I could ever wish for."

This summer, James returned to South Asia to work with women and children who had been sold into prostitution or forced labor—the kind of work she hopes to do when she graduates in 2005. "I kind of feel that I'm taking a four-year holiday here in order to study, and then to go back and make a difference there," James says, leaning forward as if to make her point more forcefully. "It's kind of ironic that you have to come to such an affluent environment to realize that your goal is to go back and make a difference in a very non-affluent place."

A RICH MIX

Colby's 73 UWC-Davis scholars are not cardboard cutouts, reducible "representatives" of diverse cultures or political views but rather individuals, of course. The range of their backgrounds, the eclectic nature of their experiences can be dizzying.

Nicholas Matatu, from Zimbabwe, for example, is the son of an influential African journalist, now dead. His brother is a documentary filmmaker in South Africa. Matatu picked asparagus and corn on a farm in the Netherlands last summer, and spent much of this summer back in Zimbabwe. At Colby, he's taking Chinese literature and Japanese politics and he hopes to study in Beijing next spring. Eventually he'd like to live in Asia.

Nandini Naik, from India, is a talented actress studying international theater and religious studies. Naik had a role in the campus staging of *The Vagina Monologues* recently. Joseph Okeyo, of Kenya, a fine basketball player, arrived on campus with experience in an AIDS hospice in Bangkok and is headed for an MBA and a job in banking.

Lubos Hudec, an accordion player from the Czech Republic, is studying music and physics. Adelin Cai, from Singapore, whose father is a professional magician, has been teaching at a school for hearing-impaired youngsters for the past two summers and is now a stalwart of the popular Social Action Theater troupe at Colby.

Andriy Avramenko, the son of two engineers from the Ukraine, surprised himself by falling in love with classes in art and literature, especially one course on "World Heroes" taught by an Irishman. "It had that odd mix, maybe that's why I liked it," he says as he prepares for his "year abroad" at the London School of Economics.

International scholarships at Colby College were designed and funded with the hope of creating an environment for just this sort of bold intellectual discovery. These examples amount to just a thumbnail sketch of how this effort has begun to play out. This is now a campus where an African student is learning Chinese, a Bulgarian is thinking anew about the plight of the gypsies, a Ukrainian is praising his Irish professor, a Polish student is reconsidering his views about the Middle East and scores of small and large encounters between international and domestic students lead daily to sometimes difficult, and often profound, exchanges.

The aim, top administrators at the college say, is to enrich college life for international students and for American students alike by placing their liberal arts education right at the intersection of global change, serendipitous discovery and personal encounter. This kind of "odd mix" may lie at the heart of a distinctively modern college education.

