

Duke-Essen Exchange: May 9- June 9, 2006
by Caroline Kita

This past summer, I was given the opportunity to travel to Essen, Germany as part of a “pilot” program to establish an exchange between the University of Duisburg-Essen and Duke University.

The welcome that we received by our colleagues in Germany was overwhelming. Dr. Jochen Vogt, a visiting professor at Duke in the Fall Semester of 2005, who extended the initial invitation to my colleagues and I to come to Essen, had set up two courses for us to take during our stay. The first was a writing workshop with Prof. Ulrike Pospiech, and the second was a short survey of German literature in the post-war period, led by Prof. Hanna Koellhofer. We were also invited to attend lectures and participate in a workshop with acclaimed crime- novelist Friedrich Ani, as part of the Poet-in-Residence series. The courses gave us a structure for our time at the University and also provided us with the opportunity to interact with members of the Germanistik Faculty as well as other students. Normally when one studies at a German university, the seminars are quite large and it is easy to be lost in the crowd. Our courses, however, were quite small and I was really challenged to participate, ask questions and engage in a dialogue with the professor and students. The courses also introduced me to subject areas, such as German Pop-Literature, that are not normally a part of the curriculum taught at Duke. Furthermore, I also had the opportunity to sit in on lectures held at the University to gain an interesting insight on how German is taught at German Universities and how their programs differ from those offered in the states.

Outside of the university, our hosts in Essen went to great efforts to introduce us to the cultural life of the surrounding area. I took advantage of many cultural events, such as the Philharmonic, the theater and the art museum. We also took a tour of the Zeche Zollverein, a former factory complex turned monument to the Steel industry in the Ruhr River region of Germany.

Above all, I believe that I benefited from the opportunity for language immersion. As Essen is an area of Germany that is not highly populated by tourists, I was forced everyday to speak German and to use the language in my seminar courses. I can honestly say that I feel that I developed more confidence in my speaking abilities during these four weeks than during the entire year that I spent in Austria before I came to Duke. Our colleagues in Essen were supportive and very welcoming hosts, but they also created a stimulating learning environment and challenged all of us to take advantage of all the opportunities available to us: to meet other young people, network with professors, and explore new areas of study.

This past September, three students from the program in Essen came to Duke to reciprocate this visit. Over their month-long stay, the students attended lectures at the Duke, participated in seminars in our department and even presented their own research topics to the faculty and graduate students here. Their presence in the opening weeks of the semester really united the entire department, bringing us together for a number of functions, both casual and formal. Because our department is so interdisciplinary, I found last year that it was rare that faculty and students came together during the busy semester outside of class. I was pleased to see how much the esprit-du-coeur improved when the Essen students arrived, and how it has remained now that they have left.

I believe that an Essen-Duke exchange program would be a wonderful addition to the departments of both universities. The trial-runs this past summer and fall have demonstrated that there is enthusiasm on the part of both students and faculty to foster a relationship between the two schools. I think that it is to Duke's great advantage to continue to fund this program in the coming years.