

# Conf 714 Puts Theory Into Practice: As ICAR Graduate Students Host D.C. Youth at Fairfax Campus

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I remember the faces of my former ninth graders when they crossed the stage to receive their high school diplomas, with the promise of college, jobs, and future dreams ahead of them. Today I imagine being a teacher in a District of Columbia Ward Seven school where 67% of the freshman class will drop out sometime during ninth or tenth grade. This tragic reality moved this Spring's Conf 714 class to study conflict intervention in urban communities and to engage with community members east of the Anacostia River. We partnered with College and Career Connections (CCC). CCC is an NGO that helps sixth to ninth graders in D.C. to develop their career goals and college aspirations, offering skill-building programs to increase their chances for success. Drawing on capacity building theory, which acknowledges that building relational networks is critical to overall development success, our class designed two programs; one in which D.C. students visited Mason's Fairfax campus, and the other in which our class visited the SEED Charter school in D.C.

With tremendous support and assistance from the ICAR undergraduate staff and a host of volunteers across the Fairfax campus, we implemented a day-long field trip to Mason for 17 female students from Caesar Chavez Public Charter School to learn about college life. Undergraduate facilitators for the day included Mike Parks of ICAR, as well as Karima Scott, Garret Claybrooks, Johnetta Saygbe and Adriana Bonilla, all alumni from George Mason's Early Identification Program, a program that helps first generation Virginia high school students enroll in and successfully complete college. The student leaders' creativity, insight, and willingness to reach out and help others to succeed was inspiring.

Cory Jackson, Assistant to Dr. Merten, welcomed



Conf 714 student and participants engage in World Cafe. Photo: J. Neal.



ICAR/CCC participants spend a day at Fairfax. Photo: J. Neal.

the students on behalf of Mason. Then Dr. Peter Pober delivered a riveting keynote address on Desire, Drive, and Passion, and then the students toured the campus. After lunch, Ph.D. student RJ Nickels hosted a World Café with the assistance of undergraduate facilitators, who shared personal experiences and stories, answering questions as participants shared their hopes and fears. Martha Cooper, an ICAR Masters student, led a reflective practice exercise for the closing session. When asked to rate their visit on a scale of one to five, almost all of the participants put up a high five! Mason facilitator Adriana Bonilla remarked that, "I didn't know that I could make a difference in such a short time," Adriana thought that we should run the program again, feeling that "it's particularly important for girls to see that they can do the same thing we are doing, if they have the desire."

Another project took place at the SEED Boarding School, home to middle school students Sunday through Thursdays, with ICAR students meeting with College & Career Connections weekly program participants. In two one-hour sessions, students Amanda Wilkins, Mohammed Albasha, and Martha Cooper designed interactive exercises that introduced how our field intertwines theory, research, and practice to better inform our conflict interventions. We practiced facilitating dialogues that address difficult problems, like what courage means in the context of community dialogue. ■

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