

200 On a Mission To Globalize the Humanities

The future of the Humanities is held in trust halfway across the world and here in Asheville, says literature professor **Margaret (Peg) Downes**, who spent three weeks in August in the Central Asian countries of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, comparing programs, practices and philosophies with her counterparts there.

"Globalizing the humanities is more important than ever," Dr. Downes says. "In the United States we host visitors from other countries and include 'foreign works' in our syllabi, but there are so many more opportunities for enrichment."

Dr. Downes was one of five American representatives of higher education to the Aga Khan Humanities Project for Central Asia, whose objective is to help these newly independent states of the former Soviet Union overcome civil unrest and economic instability and lay the foundation for a stable society and marketplace. And educating younger citizens in the humanities is at the heart of achieving this goal. The project works with selected native professors and students at nine Central Asian public universities, helping them become productive and communicative citizens of a modern society—without forsaking their traditions. The hope is that these carefully constructed humanities programs will soon become universitywide core requirements.

The project was sponsored by the U.S. Association for Core Texts and Courses (of which Dr. Downes is a board member), the Mellon Foundation and the international Aga Khan Foundation. The U.S. team met with university rectors (presidents) and faculty. "We had intense conversations, three and four hours at a time," Dr. Downes says. "But the defining

moment for me was having access to their students' diaries. Since classes weren't in session, I could see how these students think and how much like UNCA's students they are! These notebooks are treasures for us."



Downes

No stranger to foreign travel and cultural diversity, Dr. Downes nevertheless experienced a few "firsts." She ate horse belly sausage ("not bad"), drank fermented mare's milk ("strong as beer") and appreciated the women's colorful clothing. She also noticed that her Asian colleagues dressed up for meetings ("education has a dignity there that demands this"). The group usually sailed through military checkpoints in their car with diplomatic plates, and they traveled everywhere with student guides who were fluent in several languages.

"This experience has made me see that humanities programs globally can benefit from sharing ideas, students and faculty," she says. "Economics and politics today are indisputably global; education needs to catch up."

The group has plenty of follow-up in the works—a probable ACTC conference in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in 2002; faculty and student exchanges; summer courses; writing projects and more.

"This Humanities Project in Central Asia is a perfect fit for UNCA," says Dr. Downes, UNCA's first NEH Professor in the Humanities who currently holds a Feldman Professorship.

Peg Downes, professor of literature and language, is president-elect of the National Association for General and Liberal Studies, and a board member of the Association for Core Texts and Courses' new Liberal Arts Institute at the University of Dallas. She co-directs, with the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the annual Asheville Institute on General Education each June. She led a January workshop on global views of liberal education at the annual meeting of the AAC&U. While on half-sabbatical this spring, Dr. Downes is working to start a new Center for International Liberal Education at UNCA. She will travel to Jai Hind College in India to learn how the liberal arts and sciences fit into the curriculum there. Dr. Downes became interested in global liberal education on a 2000 trip to central Asia as a consultant to the Aga Khan Humanities Project. Her article "My Journey into International Liberal Education" is in the spring issue of the AAC&U journal *Liberal Education*.



■ **Elizabeth Downes** was named executive director of the **Association of Independent**



Downes

Schools in the Washington, D.C., area. She served as executive director of the Washington Center for Scholarships and later as mediator for the Superior Court of the District of Columbia. The association represents 82 schools and fosters high school standards, sound educational practices and professional growth for school personnel and board members. She is a graduate of Bishop Ludden High School and Le Moyne College.

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