Testimonial about the Brussels Study Trip June 2009
Brigitte Musallam Lincoln High School, Wisconsin Rapids

The opportunity to go to Brussels through the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s European Center of Excellence was as exciting as it was also educational. Being a guest of the EU and the UW offered me personally several opportunities to enrich my academic portfolio and classroom instructions.

The trip most of all was fun and exciting. While the trip focused on the EU and Brussels, the program included a day trip to the medieval town of Bruges. Both cities are incredibly beautiful, exhibiting vast and distinctly different architectural styles. However, both cities are uniquely European, pulsing with cosmopolitanism while still reflecting small town charm and uniquely different neighborhoods. The city of Brussels is inviting with its abundance of museums, art galleries, cafés and restaurants. Brussels’ Grand Place, the one time market of the town is spectacular at any time day or night. It is impossible to take in all the sights at once. Most of the group’s participants found new delights to discover visiting Grand Place during our nightly free time. Most amazing was the vast selection of food available in Europe’s capital. Brussels offers something for everyone. From the traditional fish dishes to the ever-popular street snacks of frites (fries) with mayonnaise, or Belgian waffles, Brussels has it all. Serving both as Europe and Belgium’s capital, Brussels offers a complete international menu. Different streets and areas of the city cater to different tastes. Hence, some of the areas are crowded with North African and Middle Eastern restaurants, while others boast a wide variety of South East Asian or European establishments. While this kind of set up might be familiar to teachers of big cities the vast amount of variety is truly unique to Brussels. My personal favorite was the nightly visit to one of the many superb local chocolate shops. Leonidas, ‘the fast food of Belgium chocolate’, quite quickly became my obsession.
For an American teacher, particular from a small town, the exposure to such an international center is invaluable. We met and saw people from all over the world. These individuals represented a wide gamut of the human experience. Such exposure broadens one’s horizon and enhances teaching for multi-cultural understanding in the regular classroom. As a Social Studies teacher I found this aspect of the trip most enlightening. Of course the main goal of the program is to inform participants, the teachers, about the purpose, function and workings of the EU and NATO. These components as all other facets of the trip were exceedingly well prepared. The expert presenters at the various venues we visited were exceptionally knowledgeable, helpful and approachable. Moreover, we had lots of opportunities to collect free materials for the classroom or for professional development. For many of us we had to debate how much we should bring along so as not to go over the weight limits of our luggage. While some of the resources, such as pamphlets and handouts are available on-line or through the UW-Madison European Center for Excellence, several cannot. Hence, I am proudly displaying two new maps of Europe and the EU, as well as a collage of my personal photos of the trip in my classroom. Additionally, I am looking forward to showing the videos I received from the NATO Headquarters to my students when we are discussing the supranational organization of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

While the program offered teachers lots of usable classroom resource materials, additionally it enhanced the professional development of the participants. Regardless of the level of expertise of the individual participants, the Brussels trip offered informative presentations, resources and discussions. Everyone was able to learn something new. May it have been about the set up of the European Council or the complexities of European trade relations within the European Union. Similarly, for most of us it was instructive to learn how Europeans felt about the recent European Parliament elections and about the passage of the Lisbon Treaty. When the recent Irish vote was announced I realized this was the outcome all of our European experts had predicted and hoped for. Likewise, the outcome of Germany’s election was much easier to predict and understand after having had the benefit to listen to knowledgeable European diplomats and policy experts. Another positive aspect of the trip that offered professional development was the chance to collaborate with other teachers from around the state and country. Depending on the need or personal interest, teachers set up networks to share resources and lessons. In addition, as program participants, teachers were also encouraged to access websites and European Center of Excellence generated resources throughout the year. All of these professional development opportunities are geared to enhance classroom instructions.

Visiting the actual sites such as the European Parliament and Council cannot be duplicated with a website. Obviously this holds true for all of the other sites of the trip. Just recently in my AP European History class we were discussing how medieval cities were always walled in. This year instead of showing them a generic Internet picture, I was able to point to my own pictures of the trip. For most students seeing a medieval wall on a picture I personally took was more meaningful, creating an emotional connection and thus leading to actual learning. Finally, having had the opportunity to visit the site where Charles V accepted his responsibilities as well as where he abdicated as Holy Roman Emperor of the German Nation is invaluable. Thus, when we discuss these fateful historical moments, my responses will be more passionate and more convincing. For my students these historical individuals and places will become more real and relevant. Ultimately, my own enjoyment of coming face to face with history and current policy makers will enhance my students’ learning experiences. My students will certainly appreciate my enthusiasm and knowledge, enhanced through my own positive learning experience of this trip.
Being part of the Brussels program has given me additional professional recognition. My local newspaper ran an article with a picture and caption highlighting the positive accomplishments of a local teacher. It is remarkable how many of my students’ parents have come up to me to congratulate me about the trip and express their appreciation to be their child’s instructor. Furthermore, I am exceptionally pleased to receive a special recognition by the school board during their October 12 meeting. While I did not go on this trip expecting these accolades I humbly and appreciatively accept them on behalf of the UW-Madison European Center of Excellence.

I encourage anyone interested to enhance his/her content knowledge about the workings of the European Union to apply to the UW-Madison European Center of Excellence. The Brussels program is indeed highly informative, enjoyable and most applicable for the classroom teacher of European History, Politics and Culture. In addition, the travel and lodging arrangements were outstanding and the entire program was exceptionally well organized and implemented. I am absolutely thrilled to have been part of this outstanding program and cannot thank UW-Madison European Center of Excellence enough for giving me this terrific opportunity. It was an indeed a trip of a lifetime.

Thank you very much I greatly appreciate the opportunity to have been part of this summer’s trip.

Brigitte Musallam