



Dear Genographic Project,

Journals, poetry, and reflective images reveal that through the eleven session Genographic course at Southern State Community College, students gained a greater sense of connectedness to others and at the same time a keener sense of self in the context of new information. The course could possibly be life changing for some students as they open minds and thoughts to the oneness of the human race.

Southern State Community College (SSCC) is a small, multi-campus, college in rural Southwestern Ohio. The college's approximately 3000 students, represent a wide diversity of ages and situations. Like many community colleges, the student body is composed of traditional college students along with many non-traditional "older" students and, because of Ohio's Post Secondary Enrollment Option, several high school students. The area has very little racial or cultural diversity, and many students are first generation college students. Most of the area served by the college is in Appalachia Ohio.

In November of 2005, after hearing about the Genographic Project from a *Today Show* segment, a few faculty members began to discuss the possibility of creating a course based on the project. The following month a team was assembled to begin designing a multidisciplinary course. In the spring of 2006, **Seminar: The Genographic Project** was taught for the first time. In October of 2006 Dr Spencer Wells, Project Director and Explorer in Residence with National Geographic visited the college and spoke with students. Besides registered college students, the course always attracts individuals from the community who have an interest in the project and genealogy. Each year the popularity of the course has grown, and the course has evolved into a course that urges students to look deep inside themselves as they learn of their deep ancestry and their ancestor's ancient migrations out of Africa.

The course is team taught by a group of faculty members who represent various disciplines. Meeting one night a week, a different topic is covered by a different instructor each night. Students explore the science of DNA and biotechnology, racial diversity, linguistic development and religious implication to human migration, cultural anthropology, culture and art, genealogy, and unique cultures of Appalachia while checking the status of their DNA sample status on the Genographic Project web site.

Students are required to submit weekly journal entries, concerning their thoughts and insights as each week is experienced. It is through these journals and reflective practices that the true value of this course comes to light. Their journals reflect the changes in mindset that many experience. One non-traditional student, Connie Dickhaus, in her first journal entry reflects on losing her mother when she was ten, leaving her lost and unidentifiable. She writes, "*.....I long to know who I am. How cool is it that there is a tool that can answer two huge questions – Who am I and where did I come from?*"



During the class focusing on exploring culture and art, students are invited to first look back at the origins of art and then consider what they were learning about themselves and others and to express their learning by creating collage posters. Reflecting on who they are now in the context of new information, what they have learned, and the meaning of their genetic journey, the posters they create speak volumes. Describing an image on her poster of the entire earth within a single tear, one young student, Mary Flannery, writes, *"Each tear, each breath, and each thought I have is an expression of my own; at the same time it is an expression of the human race. We are all ourselves but we are all each other, direction only exists in our minds and in our fingers."*

The course's oldest student (84), Lois Newman audited the course with her grandson. After learning about DNA and today's technology Lois reflected; *"It is even more incredible to think that these tiny microscopic bits of life (DNA) can somehow be useful in determining the migration of people so long ago.....To me it shows how orderly the whole of creation is, while still depending on the random consequences of events. It is indeed a fascinating study and only makes me want to know more."* In his final writings, her grandson, Alex Newman wrote; *"I had the privilege of sharing the class with my grandma and I think that through this we grew closer, as we saw what we had in common and learned about each other's life experiences."*

What this course has become, and the effect it has on the students can maybe best be seen in their own words. Mary Flannery wrote, *"It's taken me two hours a week for ten weeks to realize how important diversity is in the world when I've been surrounded by it my entire life. I don't know everything and I never will. But, the more knowledge I have about the world and others around me, the more confident I can be about myself and my decisions."* **Seminar: The Genographic Project** may just be changing lives in many ways.....and who knows, The Genographic Project and courses like this one could even one day change the world. If all people could look at the world as these students have started to, insights brought about by this landmark National Geographic project, could help world unity be within reach.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeff D. Foster". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent 'J' and 'F'.

Jeff D. Foster
Associate Professor of Biology
Southern State Community College