For a regional public university in western Georgia that sends barely 200 students a year to study abroad, Columbus State University (CSU) has something that few other U.S. institutions can match: its own house in Oxford, England, and ties with the University of Oxford that allow fortunate Columbus State students and faculty to take classes and workshops there. Five hundred have done so since a retired banker named Kyle Spencer purchased a stately Edwardian home in 2002 and turned the deed over to his hometown university. Spencer House is "pivotal to our planting the flag globally," said President Timothy Mescon.

Placing that flag is a principal way Columbus State is hoping to keep raising its standards and standing among colleges in the Georgia system. The strategic plan the university adopted in 2013 seeks to foster "a vibrant, globally connected campus culture" that empowers people "to contribute to the advancement of our local and global communities." Columbus, the third largest city in Georgia after Atlanta and Augusta, is an old textile mill town on the banks of the Chattahoochee River. It lacked a college until civic leaders finally convinced the state to open a two-year institution in 1958; bachelor and master degrees were soon to follow.

Today it is the tenth largest of Georgia's 31 public colleges and universities. Half the 7,000 undergraduates and 1,400 graduate students come from Muscogee County and other neighboring places along the Alabama border, but more than a third are drawn from elsewhere in Georgia and 1,600 hail from other states. It also enrolls 130 international students. In public higher education, "geography does matter. We are, at the end of the day, in a retail business," said Mescon, former business dean at Kennesaw State University. He has stepped up recruiting in the metro Atlanta area, 100 miles away, because "that's where the market is," and recently added an international recruiter.

The biggest challenge Columbus State faces is not just finding students, but keeping them until they graduate. Only one in eight full-time freshmen who entered in 2007 graduated in four years and 30 percent in six years. A third of students attend college part-time and many are older than traditional age. Nearly half are ethnic or racial minorities. The international push at Columbus State is one of the principal ways the university is seeking to...

Editor's Note: Profiles of the five winners of the 2014 Senator Paul Simon Award for Campus Internationalization are being included in IE. The full set of profiles can be seen in Internationalizing the Campus 2014: Profiles of Success at Colleges and Universities.
expand students' horizons. CSU has strong business, computer science, and performing arts programs, the latter housed on a hip, new downtown campus alongside the Chattahoochee, which, thanks to the demolition of two old dams, features the world's largest urban whitewater course. Some of the rafts bearing tourists and thrill-seekers over the rapids advertise the university logo.

**A Strategic Plan and Student Fee Build Momentum for Internationalization**

As Neal McCrillis heard the story, when a wealthy local benefactor offered in 1998 to endow a professorship to teach European history, she was told, "We're not that big. We can't have one person who just teaches British or French history. We need something broader." So McCrillis, a British historian, was hired for the endowed professorship both to teach and create a Center for International Education (CIE). "I had a mandate to develop study abroad programs, but beyond that the administration was not really quite sure what the center should be," he recalled. For years the center occupied a nondescript room in Howard Hall, a classroom building. Today it is in a small building of its own, the International House, in a central location, and while still teaching a few courses, McCrillis is kept busy as CIE's full-time director.

The scope of international programs grew gradually, then picked up steam when the provost asked the faculty International Education Committee in 2011 to come up with the first comprehensive strategy for campus internationalization. They produced a detailed blueprint for ratcheting up study abroad offerings, curricular integration, faculty development, international student services, service learning, and other international activities.

The timing was right because another panel was already at work on a new strategic plan for the entire university, and several international goals were embraced and articulated in that broader document, including expanding study abroad enrollment by nearly half, tripling international enrollments, offering students the opportunity to earn an interdisciplinary International Studies Certificate, and widening the circle of students and faculty engaged in on-campus activities.

Neal McCrillis, history professor and founder and director of the Center for International Education.

Study Abroad Coordinator Kimberly Lawrence

Associate Dean of Letters and Sciences Patrick McHenry says students must be convinced there's a job payoff from study abroad.
Becky Becker, a professor of theater, now spends half her time directing the new international studies certificate program.

Marketing major Jason Todd Raley Jr. studied in three countries and earned one of the first international studies certificates.

Equally crucial was a decision approved by students in 2011 to add a $14 per semester international education fee. "That gave Neal this recurring revenue source to fund scholarships for study abroad and underwrite faculty exploration in other countries. It's a critical annuity in support of this globalization that benefits a huge number of students," said Mescon, who became president in 2008.

CIE now awards upwards of $300,000 a year in grants and scholarships. Honors College students are guaranteed a $3,200 scholarship for study abroad in their junior or senior year. CIE offers "first-come, first-served" study abroad grants of $650 to $1,050 to all comers who commit to signing up for a program. "Our experience over the years is that the grants which cover a quarter or more of the cost make the programs accessible to many more students," said McCrillis.

Drumming Up Enthusiasm for Study Abroad

Some 200 Cougars study abroad each year, twice as many as a decade ago. "You can't just sit in the office and wait for students to show up, because that's not going to happen," McCrillis said.

"It's hard work to drum up the number of students you need for a program," said geography professor Amanda Rees, who has taught courses in Oxford and Belize. Kimberly Lawrence, the study abroad coordinator, deploys student ambassadors to make 200 presentations in classrooms each year, and Rees herself makes the rounds of colleagues' classes to pitch her overseas courses. "You're trying to get in front of 300 to 400 students to drum up a handful," said the British-born professor.

Patrick McHenry, associate dean of the College of Letters and Sciences, said students need to be convinced that education abroad will pay off when they enter the job market. "The more we get that message out to them, the better. Our students are very practical minded," said McHenry, a Milton and Renaissance scholar who has taught literature classes in Oxford and in Florence and Montepulciano in Italy. "We have to cajole them no matter what."

Fast Track to an International Studies Certificate

The International Studies Certificate that the faculty envisioned became a reality in fall 2013. Theater professor Becky Becker was put in charge and given an office and assigned half-time to the Center for International Education. The requirements include study abroad or an international internship or service, at least 18 hours of coursework, and a capstone course or research project. Two students completed the requirements and received the certificate on their diplomas in May 2014, including Jason Todd Raley, Jr.

"I had unknowingly already taken all but one of the classes I needed for the certificate," said the marketing major, who studied earlier in South Korea and Spain and right after graduation went to Costa Rica on a third, short-term CSU study program.

"I just took these courses because I really love internationally themed classes and activities. Being a marketing major, they could help me get in the door to have international ties to my career. I'll have an edge on some people who may want the same thing, but have nothing else to back them up," said Raley, the son of a state trooper and forensic accountant.

As a global ambassador for CIE, Raley also used his marketing skills to convince other Cougars to study abroad. "I love getting people to buy into things they normally wouldn't buy into," he said.

"Every day, when somebody came in here and said, 'I can't afford it' or 'I'm afraid to fly,' I'd look at them and say, 'There are scholarships. You can pay for three-fourths of it with nothing out of your pocket if you do some research and do it right. And flying's safer than driving.'"

Twenty-seven students so far have taken the required introductory course that Becker teaches; McCrillis credited her with making inroads with faculty in departments across the campus. "That's really important," McCrillis said, "so that when a biology student says, 'I'd like to have the international certificate,' they get a positive response from their adviser." (The other certificate recipient was a theater major who researched Nigeria's spirit culture.)

On top of study abroad and programming on campus, the certificate "provides an important missing piece. It ties all those things into the students' majors," said McCrillis, who chairs the USG System Council for International Education.
Hanane Toumi of Morocco, Omovueme Emasealu of Nigeria, and Alice-Roxana Barna of Romania won International Student Service Scholarships and other awards.

The Speed Dating Approach to International Conversations

A signature element of Columbus State's global education efforts is the International Learning Community (ILC), which brings faculty together with students in large numbers to delve into an important issue over the course of a year through lectures, discussion groups, films, field trips, and other activities inside and outside the classroom. Faculty choose a theme each year—migrations in 2013-2014, revolutions and technology in 2012-2013, and "strangers in a strange land" in 2011-2012—and commit specific classes to be part of the ILC, which are marked in the course catalog as "I" classes. Many are classes freshman must take as part of their First Year Community experience, but some are upper division courses and they span a dozen or more disciplines, from art and business to environmental studies and theater. At least 700 students each year take part.

Sixteen evenings a year students come to the International House for snacks and "Global Dialogues," which are small-group, student-to-student conversations that Rees, who chairs the International Learning Community, likens to a form of "speed dating."

International students performing service in exchange for their in-state tuition waivers lead the 90-minute dialogues. Students sit at a half dozen tables and change tables every 15 minutes to hear even more viewpoints. "They share a lot and hear a lot. It's really very intense and, when you read their writing afterwards, it gets very personal," said Rees, who requires students in her "I" courses to attend three dialogues a semester. Other faculty use them as an opportunity for extra credit.

McCrillis said the dialogues give some students "their first chance to hear viewpoints and attitudes other than those expressed by their Georgia-born and -raised neighbors."

"Students are genuinely interested. That makes me very happy," said Vanessa Jackson, a Jamaican graduate assistant at the CIE who earned her bachelor's degree in biology at CSU. "Columbus State has become much more internationalized since I came in 2009."

Omovueme Emasealu, 26, a senior computer science major from Nigeria, seconds that. "I think (Columbus State) is becoming more international on a weekly basis," said Emasealu. He chuckles about classmates' misconceptions and stereotypes about Africa, but also appreciates how "very open and friendly" Americans are. He still remembers his surprise on his first plane ride to Atlanta when "a lady began telling me her life story. I was thinking, 'Really? You can do that?'"

Alice Roxana Barno, 28, a pianist from Romania earning a second bachelor's degree, relishes the mentoring from faculty. "Back home, if you wanted to talk to a professor, you'd better make an appointment three weeks before and do not look him in the eyes," she said.
John Finley, who teaches international business, said, "It sounds corny, but there's a real esprit de corps with the international committee," with people always willing to stay when meetings run long. English professor Dan Ross, the panel's chair, agreed, saying, "More than any committee I've ever been on, that one works." He credits McCrillis with making the advisory panel as effective as it is. Ross, a 25-year faculty veteran who has taken classes to Japan and England, said, "We just had nobody doing these things until Neal came along."

One successful study abroad program begets another. Julie Ballenger, chair of the biology department, has been a role model for colleagues. The plant geneticist led her first tropical ecology class to the Bahamas in 1999. Since then she's taught environmental classes in Africa (Botswana and Tanzania), Ecuador, Belize, Costa Rica, and Australia as well.

"After camping in the Kalahari Desert for two weeks with lions walking through our campsite, it was like every door opened. Nothing was impossible. From that point on, it's been the students pushing and driving all these new programs," said Ballenger, who also did a stint as assistant director of CIE when study abroad offerings were just getting off the ground. "Many of our students haven't left the state of Georgia or the Southeast. When you see them after they come back, they have a new confidence. They carry themselves differently."

Kevin Burgess, a biology colleague, also takes students far afield, from Australia to Ecuador. Burgess had six job offers after a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Toronto and "probably wouldn't have come here if it wasn't for the study abroad program. That's what pushed me."

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**Hands-On Faculty Committee Guides International Activities**

With a three-person staff, McCrillis leans heavily on the Faculty Committee to superintend the international enterprise. Twenty-two people serve on the committee and eight subcommittees that review study abroad programs, deal with scholarships, approve visiting scholars, and tend other international matters.

**A Philanthropist Pays His Oxford Experience Forward**

Five hundred Columbus State students and faculty have studied at Oxford while living in the three-story, century-old home on Woodstock Road that Kyle Spencer purchased for CSU for $2 million in 2002. The retired 88-year-old banker never spent a night there himself because his late wife Sara "preferred the hotel," he recalled with a smile. But the Spencers did stay in Oxford's Gothic dorms in the
1980s while attending continuing education classes through the Oxford Berkeley Program.

"Every time we went, they had a mixture of undergraduates, graduate students, and outsiders like us. We had a very impressive, very warm tutor who was a born educator. The thing that impressed us was that they wanted us foreigners and rebels to learn," he said. The Spencers returned three times and then began paying for their children's teachers and later faculty from Presbyterian College and Columbus State to attend the summer sessions.

Now, CSU faculty teach three, two-week courses there each summer and McCrillis takes faculty there for a workshop each autumn. In addition, Columbus State sends up to five students a year to spend a semester at an Oxford college and take tutorials with a don. Some Oxford undergraduates live in Spencer House with them. Spencer, the benefactor, donates an additional $150,000 a year to cover all the students' costs above CSU's regular tuition.
As a senior, Mark Sciuchetti spent a semester at Regents Park College. Now a history graduate student and aspiring professor, Sciuchetti said curious Oxford students sometimes asked if he was a Rhodes Scholar. "I just said, 'No, I'm a Spencer scholar.' But they were surprised a state university provides so much funding."

The existence of Spencer House "made it impossible for us to drop the ball" on internationalization, said English professor Susan Hrach, who was recently honored by the Georgia Board of Regents for innovative teaching approaches, including enhancing global awareness and reducing culture shock in classes taught in England and Italy.

Mescon hopes one day to convert a carriage house on the Spencer property into classrooms and additional apartments. "We'd like to build a much bigger facility, whatever Oxford will allow," the president said.

CHRISTOPHER CONNELL is a veteran Washington, D.C. education writer and author of NAFSA's annual Internationalizing the Campus reports.