

August, 1993 - Richard M. J. Thurston, Political Science

The two Model United Nations programs at Saint Peter's College are in their sixth (the College Model U.N.) and third (the High School Model U.N.) years respectively. As the faculty member primarily responsible for both, I feel confident enough about the response of our students to state that both programs must be considered as successes and as having become significant aspects of the college experience offered to our students.

The College Model U.N. program involves Saint Peter's students as participants in the Harvard National Model U.N. Conference held annually in February in Boston. Colleges and universities from all over the United States and Canada (at the February 1992 conference over 115 schools and some 2500 students) participate in a four-day simulation of the real United Nations, each school representing one or two U.N. member countries depending on the number of students attending the conference. Students play the role of delegates to the U.N. representing the country they have been assigned. While it is difficult precisely to describe the conference atmosphere, I can tell you that every year I have watched these young men and women become totally absorbed in their roles, vigorously defending the national interest of their country, and bargaining, negotiating, pleading, arguing with delegates of other countries. Pedagogically, it is, I believe, an excellent learning exercise in a variety of communications skills which will serve the student well far beyond his/her college years. In its role-playing dimension, this Model U.N. is also valuable in that it directly exposes students to the broad variety of cultures and national aspirations that characterize the global community. In an increasingly interdependent world, the future of the U.S., both economically and politically, will to a significant extent be dependent upon the knowledge that we have of other peoples and other cultures.

The High School Model U.N. program has as its centerpiece a two-day conference hosted by Saint Peter's College at which high school students play the role of U.N. delegates, and our students act as conference staff, presiding over the debates, ensuring that U.N. parliamentary procedure is adhered to, and when the debate process begins to slow, reinvigorating it with proposals for topic areas not considered, and so on. While attendance at the last conference in April was down slightly from the previous year's, the debate in the various committees was spirited and the high school students, to their credit, were no less enthusiastic in playing their roles. The high school faculty advisors in attendance at the April conference were very positive about the quality of the conference, and I have every reason to believe that their enthusiasm and our plans to promote more aggressively next year's conference will have positive consequences--a greater number of participating high schools and students.

While it would seem clear that the two Model U.N. programs are especially of interest to political science majors, I would like to stress that it has never been my intention to limit participation only to them. On the contrary, I am convinced

that the broad variety of skills that students are called upon to develop in preparing for the conferences and to use effectively in participating at the conferences (While I do encourage students to participate in both, I certainly do not expect them to do so.) can serve any student well regardless of his/her major. Clearly the emphasis is on communications, both written and oral. However, the goal is not one of empty rhetoric, but rather on substantive contributions made in pursuit of the building of consensus. And, as we as educators and citizens are only too well aware, the task of making substantive contributions to the public debate on any issue is best not left solely to politicians. In recognition of that democratic truism, I encourage the interest of all students in our Model U.N. programs and am at the service of any student who would like to know more about them.