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- [About](#)
 - [Advertise](#)
- [Print Edition](#)
- [Textbooks](#)
- [Business Center](#)
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- [Classifieds](#)

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Student presenters cross oceans and plains for studies

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Whether it's applying your studies to field work in Trenton, helping female inmates write their memoirs or spending a week on a Native American reservation, experiential education can offer a learning experience that is often unattainable within the four walls of a classroom.

On Feb. 8, Michele Tarter, associate professor of English, and the School of Culture and Society hosted a forum that gave five students the opportunity to recount and reflect upon their off-campus experiences.

In an e-mail, Benjamin Rifkin, dean of the School of Culture and Society, said that “experiential education constitutes an opportunity for (the College’s) students not merely to recognize the imperfectness of the world they are inheriting, but also, and more importantly, it constitutes an opportunity for our students to change that world, to make it a better place, even if just in one small community.”

Emmanuel Martinez Alcaraz, junior chemistry and anthropology double major, discussed two classes he had taken with Rachel Adler, an anthropology professor at the College.

In these classes, Alcaraz researched the Latino community in Trenton, focusing specifically on health issues. Adler plans to publish these results in the future.

Lire Botes, junior business major and Bonner Scholar, shared his memories of the recent summer trip he took to Nicaragua with other Bonner Scholars.

“As a Bonner, it is important to apply what we learn to the areas we live in, and I was definitely able to draw parallels between Trenton and Nicaragua,” Botes said.

Botes travelled from Managua to Matagalpa to San Marcos, volunteering in some of the region’s poorest areas and learning about how U.S. foreign policy affects the country.

Rachel Goldfarb, English graduate student, spoke about her experience co-teaching with Tarter. Together, they taught “Woman is the Word,” an inmates’ memoir-writing class, held at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women, New Jersey’s only maximum-security women’s prison.

One moment in particular will always stay with Goldfarb, she said.

“In class, we were reading a poem titled ‘She is,’ and every line started with those two words,” she said. “We encouraged the inmates to write their own poem in the same style, and this one woman, Donna, began every line with a lower case ‘s.’ In that moment I realized that Donna had taken on the stereotype of a prisoner and essentially made herself a lower-case letter.”

Goldfarb continued to say that she encouraged Donna to capitalize the ‘s’ in ‘she,’ and after doing so, Donna told her that “it had made all the difference.”

Matt Fillare, senior self-designed anthropology major described his week-long stay at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, where he was able to interact with the Lakota people and volunteer with other students from across the U.S.

“It was the most intensive and fulfilling learning experience imaginable,” he said. “A lot of things I expected were proven, but many more were turned on its head.”

One aspect of the reservation that caught Fillare’s attention was the fact that despite the overwhelming poverty on Pine Ridge, there were no homeless people and no orphans. The sense of brotherhood and community is so strong among the Lakota people, that no neighbor will ever turn away a tribe member in need, he said.

Fillare realized that his experience gave him the opportunity to reflect on his culture and values and told his audience that, “when a trip like this opens your eyes, they are impossible to close.”

Finally, Julia Flagg, senior Spanish and sociology double major, recalled her study abroad experience in Costa Rica and the time she spent interning at a recycling facility in San José.

Surprised by the amounts of trash that littered the streets of the greenest country in the world, Flagg’s experience reinforced her interest in recycling and the environment.

Rifkin expressed his hope that “students attending the forum would be inspired to think about the enormous potential of learning beyond Metzger Drive.”