

GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

SLC is ensuring that international students feel part of the community, both as students and as alumni.



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THE TRIP FROM ACCRA, GHANA, TO KINGSTON,

ONTARIO, was a challenging one for Veronica Dogbegah. She had an eight-hour flight from Ghana to Portugal, where she endured a 14-hour layover. From Lisbon, she flew into Toronto, arriving a little after midnight. She had never been to Canada before. She had booked a hotel room so she could get some rest before continuing on to Kingston, where she would soon start the User Experience (UX) Design program.

In Ghana, Veronica had worked for a software company. “I looked after customer complaints. I listened to customers’ problems, then I would send the issue to someone else to sort the problem, then I would follow up with the customer to see if the issue had been resolved. I realized that my strength was in problem-solving, but in my role, I was



Veronica Dogbegah,
User Experience
Design, 2020, Project
Management, 2021



handing over the problems for someone else to solve.”

She started exploring user experience design, which builds services and technologies that best meet the needs of both users and service operators. Veronica’s research led her to St. Lawrence College, and its graduate certificate in UX design. She was excited about the opportunity to build her skills in this rapidly expanding field.

First though, she had to get to Kingston. And there was a problem. In Toronto, she discovered that her hotel room booking had been cancelled. She tried other hotels. They were either wildly out of her budget or had a check-in time of 4 pm the next day. After more than 24 hours of travel, on three continents, Veronica just wanted to get to Kingston, where she had a place to stay and could get some sleep.

“So, I weighed my options,” she says. “I weighed the prices of hotels—up to \$200—and then I checked the price of an Uber—\$240—to take me to Kingston.”

So, Veronica utilized her well-honed problem-solving skills and got to her new home in Kingston at 4:30 am via Uber.

It’s this type of initiative, combining the innate talent and learned experience of international students, that St. Lawrence College wants to attract. And while some international students are coming to SLC for their first post-secondary experience, many more, like Veronica, enter their programs armed with years of complementary training and work experience.

“A lot of these students are attracted to our graduate certificates or diploma programs,” says Richard Webster, International Education Manager, Community Development. “For example, in our Health Care Administration program, many of our international students are already doctors or nurses in their home country. They are coming in with a whole host of skills, then looking to be building administrative skills in relation to health care. The same with our Supply Chain Management, Project Management, and other programs. Particularly for those groups of students, there’s a real opportunity for us to help employers understand the degree of expertise that a lot of our students already have before they even arrived to get their SLC education.”

Kishan Kapadiya already had two degrees—a BSc in horticulture and an MSc in plant molecular biology—when he came to Canada from India. He was interested in the business side of the agricultural sector, so he came to St. Lawrence College to study Project Management and then International Business Management. One of his favourite



Kishan Kapadiya
Project Management,
2020, International
Business
Management, 2021

components of the Project Management program was the volunteer placement, designed to give students practical experience using the tools they learned in class, while growing their local network.

Kishan’s placement was at Kingston’s Robinson Community Garden. “They asked me to look at their crop yield and post-harvest losses.” Kishan also tackled the community garden’s watering methods, moving them from watering by hand to a sprinkler irrigation system. He continued volunteering for the community garden after his

placement was over. “I wanted to improve my own knowledge,” he says. “I wanted to do something for homeless people, because the garden contributes their vegetables to local organizations that feed homeless people.”

“For some international students,” says Shelley Aylesworth-Spink, VP International Education, “volunteer work is not something they’re familiar with. Volunteering at a local agency is a great opportunity for international students to better understand their new community...and it may just lead to a full-time paid job in their field.”

Veronica was aware of the benefits of volunteerism; she had been an active member of Rotary International in Ghana. “In order to get familiar with an environment,” she says, “you need to do things that let you meet people.” In Kingston, she researched community groups she could get involved in. She competed in the Mayor’s Innovation

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— SHELLEY AYLESWORTH-SPINK, VP INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

Challenge, which invites Kingston post-secondary students to brainstorm new ways to tackle specific gaps in local services. “That gave me a starting point,” says Veronica. “I met people from the community and the mayor’s office. In addition, I connected with people on LinkedIn whom I wouldn’t have otherwise met.

Veronica’s classroom experiences gave her new connections, too. “The classes here were smaller than I was used to, so that gave me a more personalized relationship with others. I could reach out to my professors; they were very accessible. They were very much concerned about student growth and about our career paths. It wasn’t just a case of ‘Learn this and then go survive by yourself.’” Veronica also connected with community groups through her UX design program, working for project clients like Kingston’s Grand Theatre. “I put these projects in my portfolio,” she says, “and they made me ready to engage recruiters.”

SLC isn’t leaving international students’ success to chance: the College has introduced a number initiatives as part of its Global Engagement Strategy, both to remove barriers for international students and to grow a global mindset for the College community.

Prior to 2017, St. Lawrence College only saw about 100 international students a year, says Shelley. “That year,” she says, “St. Lawrence started accepting hundreds more international students.”

But subsequent consultations with the College community showed that the simple expansion of international numbers wasn’t enough: there needed to be a more thoughtful process, one that embodied the vision of the College, the needs of the students, and the opportunity to embrace a global outlook.

Understanding that students come from a variety of learning and teaching styles helps professors and administrators bridge barriers their students may face. Shelley says, “Many students will come from a system of secondary education where memorization is important: they’re not really invited to be part of a classroom discussion. Working in groups can be a new experience.”

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successful as they go out into the workforce.”

International students at the College are eligible for a post-graduate work permit. For some, this is an opportunity to add Canadian work experience to their resumé; for others, it’s also the first step to becoming a permanent resident in Canada.

As part of his Project Management course, Kishan got a better sense of the regional job market when he went on a site visit to a local employer—Canopy Growth Corporation in Smiths Falls. Previously, he had never even thought about a career in the cannabis industry, but now it intrigued him. “This was all totally new to me,” he says, “but I’m a risk-taker. I love to try new things.” Here was an emerging industry that needed people who knew about agriculture, project management, and business strategy.

Kishan is now working at Canopy’s research and development facility in Scarborough and Veronica recently moved to Ottawa, for her dream job as a UX designer at SAP, a global software company.

“It’s a win if our graduates find meaningful employment connected to their program areas,” Richard says. “But it’s also important that we’re doing everything we can to support our communities, as well as fulfilling our role in addressing local labour shortages.” Now with the support of an anonymous donor, SLC has created a Global Engagement Community Development program to do just that. Richard is now focusing on building deeper connections with local employers and services in the College’s three home communities, starting with Cornwall. These connections will set up many more international graduates for success in their new communities. And that success doesn’t just mean finding a job locally in their field after they graduate. It also means finding part-time work when they’re still students. It means finding a good place to live, access to faith-based supports, and feeling part of the community, whether they are in Cornwall, Brockville, or Kingston.

“I’m really excited about building this program,” Richard says. “We want to ensure that our international students coming to St. Lawrence have a seamless experience, that they feel connected to the community from day one. They’re connected to volunteer opportunities, employment opportunities, and networking opportunities.” ✖

GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY 2020–2024

- 1** Create a distinctive global culture at SLC encompassing the daily academic and student life activities of staff, students, faculty, and alumni.
- 2** Develop and support global citizenship among students, staff, faculty, and alumni.
- 3** Champion both the transition for international students to SLC and Canada along with an enriched intercultural learning experience for all students.
- 4** Create and nurture excellence in academic opportunities and partnerships in Canada and abroad.
- 5** Work in our SLC campus communities to support intercultural awareness and meet immigration needs.

The SLC in Five Strategic Plan has a goal to strengthen the Global Alumni Network. One initiative is to develop a Global Alumni Ambassadors program to support current students, support Global Engagement strategies, and maintain SLC networks after graduation. Interested in learning more and being a part of the program? Find out more at stlawrencecollege.ca/alumni.