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## CAPA FORGES GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

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Image by Izzy Mozer

Refining CAPA's focus on human rights, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding has been Susan Sgorbati's goal since she stepped into the role of the center's director. Central to this process has been building connections with centers, organizations, and giving Bennington College students a chance to expand on what they learn in the classroom by working in the field.

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In the fall of 2014, Sgorbati's goal became a reality when and Rabbi Michael Cohen led Bennington College into forging a new relationship with the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies in Israel (AIES). Less than a year later, she also made a new connection with the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice & Human Rights Training Institute in Florence, Italy. Now a third liaison is in the works this year, with Bennington College's new collaboration with the Center for Peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or CIM.

Each of the new relationships that Bennington now enjoys with these centers and institutions offer unique opportunities for Bennington students to apply what they learn in the classroom to work on the ground – and this extends beyond subjects taught in CAPA.

Michael Cohen was a founding faculty of AIES in 1996. He initiated the connection between it and Bennington College. AIES, focuses on environmental studies, approaching this topic through the lens of social justice and peace building.

Cohen believes it is beneficial for students who focus on environmental studies and geology to study in a landscape so radically different from Vermont as it offers a chance to view our own landscape with “new eyes.” The unique living space on what Michael Thomson, '15, described as a “quasi-communist” kibbutz, or the opportunity for a home stay, both lend themselves being ideal places for anthropology and sociology students to study that way of life, Cohen says.

Thomson was the most recent Bennington College student to spend a semester with the Arava Institute, in the middle of the Negev Desert. There he conducted an independent study “on the efficacy of small, short-term people-to-people workshops in changing perceptions of the ‘other’.”

“It was a big learning moment in how to conduct an in-depth study across linguistic and cultural boundaries,” said Thomson.

Bennington faculty and staff such as Sgorbati and Duncan Dobbelmann, among others, have visited and even taught courses at AIES. Cohen will be returning for the Fall 2016 term to teach there. It is not a one-way relationship, however. Many alumni from AIES have come to our campus through CAPA's Leadership Institute to participate in different peace studies and conflict resolution work. An opportunity for Bennington College to provide credit to students from the Middle East studying at AIES is in the works, and conversations have recently begun to build a Master's program that would allow students to study environmental studies and conflict resolution at both institutions.

The most freshly formed connection is between CAPA and the Center for Peacebuilding in northern Bosnia and Herzegovina, which offers

students on the ground opportunities for interdisciplinary work related to peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Over this last Field Work Term I spent three weeks working at CIM, where I taught English and assisted them on their goal of building more partnerships with universities around the world in teaching and practicing conflict resolution.

A group of Bennington students from Bosnia have applied to work for CIM for a summer Field Work Term where they will apply their own interests, such as architecture and theater, in varying ways to the larger goal of creating a space for inter-ethnic dialogue in Bosnia.

This last Field Work Term Cristina Valdivieso, '16, worked for the Robert F. Kennedy Training institute, in Florence, Italy. The Training Institute is part of the advocacy and litigation branch of Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights, which seeks to provide activists, NGOs, State representatives and Civil Society members with the necessary tools and knowledge to work in Human Rights issues both on and off the field. Valdivieso was the first Bennington student to intern there. Now it is a permanent position open to any Bennington students in the future interested in human rights and international law.

“During my time working with the Training Institute, not only did I learn about the many different human rights conflicts the organization is currently working on, but also about the many political, economic and cultural issues that shape how human rights are enforced, implemented and perceived around the world,” said Valdivieso. “It was a great opportunity to see how human rights activism and international law play out in the global sphere.”

In April the director of the Training Institute, Andrea Galindo came to Bennington to teach a weekend long module on International Human Rights. She will be returning in the spring 2017 to teach a three-week module on the subject.

In the future, Sgorbati says, there is the potential to build similar relationships with other centers and organizations that expand the scope of hands-on learning for Bennington College students. She says this is a really exciting time for Bennington College students to engage with what they're learning, and work with it out in the world in very real circumstances – learning and working with people who are experiencing and living what Bennington students study in the classroom.

In the meantime however, Sgorbati hopes to strengthen and deepen the relationships that already exist.

“I feel really honored to be connected to them, and to give Bennington students opportunities to work with them,” said Sgorbati. “They're all on the ground. They get to turn the theory they are

studying into action.

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