

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Foreign Scholars Attend UC Santa Barbara Summer Institute to Learn about Religious Pluralism in the United States

American studies scholars from around the world are at UC Santa Barbara this summer studying the religious diversity of the United States and finding out first hand how people with widely differing beliefs can coexist.

The program that brought them here, now in its fourth year, is titled "Study of the U.S. Institute on Religious Pluralism" and was developed by UCSB's Department of Religious Studies. It is one of 10 university programs around the country funded by the Study of the United States Branch of the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, which seeks to bring foreign scholars to the United States to learn about various aspects of American life.

"Religious pluralism is increasingly a global challenge and we are delighted that the Department of State has funded us for a fourth year," said Institute Academic Director Wade Clark Roof, a professor of religious studies at UCSB. He added that the visiting scholar-students "are finding out how Americans of different faiths get along with one another."

Institute participants are scholars from universities in 18 countries: Argentina, Armenia, Bulgaria, The People's Republic of China, The Congo, Egypt, India, Italy, Jordan, Nigeria, Pakistan, The Philippines, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Tunisia, Turkey, and Uruguay.

The visiting scholars began arriving June 18 and were to begin classes June 20. The Institute runs through Aug. 1 and includes field trips to Los Angeles (July 7-10), Salt Lake City (July 20-23), Atlanta (July 23-27), and Washington, D.C. (July 27-31).

Key focus will be a timely look at how people of different faiths can get along and work toward common goals in a single society.

"We also want to look at how religion can contribute to a civil society," Roof said. "And we want to look at how religion can contribute to democratic ideals, such as respect for others, freedom and equality, all of which have their roots in religious traditions."

Other topics covered will include the history of religion in the U.S., the demography and sociology of religion, religion and politics, religion and the media, and religion and film.

The field trips are designed to help the scholars understand the breadth of religious diversity in the U.S. Depending upon how one counts splinter groups, between 200 and 2,000 religions are practiced in this country, Roof said.

"Not only do the participants learn about the U.S., but the faculty and students at UCSB have the unique opportunity to glimpse a bit of culture from 18 distinct nations," said project director Holly Grether, a graduate student in the Department of Religious Studies. "It is amazing to experience the coming together of some of the world's best religious studies scholars."

Roof said he felt the programs of the past three summers were beneficial to both guests and hosts and he hopes to have similar success this year.

"I hope our scholars will have learned about religion in the United States and that we will have learned a great deal from them," Roof said. " And I hope that we will have all developed a great deal of respect for one another."

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The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.