

The Arctic, Writ Small



For a week in March 2016, Alaska NSF EPSCoR hosted the future of the Arctic.

EPSCoR was a major sponsor of the Model Arctic Council, which brought 65 college students from around the world to the University of Alaska Fairbanks campus as part of Arctic Science Summit Week. The students spent the week portraying diplomats from arctic states in simulated meetings of the Council, a forum representing eight Arctic nations and six indigenous groups.

“A lot of us were saying we came into this with maybe 10 percent knowledge about the Arctic Council,” noted attendee Rhiannon Klein, a Ph.D. student at the University of Saskatchewan. “And we’ve left really understanding Arctic Council issues, and also just feeling a lot more passionate and engaged with them.”

Students were assigned to represent different countries or indigenous groups, and were assigned positions as either working group members, senior arctic officials or ministers. Working group members were the foot soldiers of the organization, discussing specific problems facing Arctic peoples and hashing out policies to address them.



A discussion session during the Model Arctic Council at Arctic Science Summit Week in March, 2016 on the UAF campus.

“Everyone was prepared and there was a lot of critical thinking, critical analysis all the time,” said Eva Wu, an undergraduate at McGill University. “At times it was a little overwhelming, because it was just day in and day out.”

The students split into two working groups, one of which addressed cruise ship tourism and maritime traffic, the other health and sanitation, and suicide rates in indigenous groups. Their policy recommendations were passed along to students acting as senior arctic officials, who then discussed and modified them before presenting them to the ministers. The final product was a 15-page “Fairbanks Declaration” encapsulating their findings. “It was really interesting because you got to see how the recommendations and the declarations are created and

how people are able to work together to have such a widespread consensus,” Wu said.

Participants came from 14 different countries and a wide spectrum of academic disciplines, and many were asked to represent a country that was entirely foreign to them. “Some of the students had the greatest experience trying to play a role that wasn’t them at all, that was really a learning experience for them to take on that identity and try to perform it,” noted UAF Professor of Northern Studies Mary Ehrlander, who helped to organize the meeting.

Students spoke well of the event in general, noting the high level of preparation of their fellow students, the diverse perspectives, and the strong voice that indigenous groups have in Arctic Council affairs. “I study indigenous politics and I am indigenous, and that was the best part for me, to be able to have that assertiveness without anyone being able to shut you down right away,” noted Veronica Guido, a student at York University on Toronto.

Unbeknownst to the students, their final “Fairbanks Declaration” had a life beyond their meeting: it was adopted by the actual Council as the starting point for its discussions at Arctic Science Summit Week.

“I think we may see the influence of it on the final declaration at the ministerial meeting next May in Fairbanks,” Ehrlander said. “That’s very unusual, this has never happened before.”



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