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# First student exchange program is a bridge to Belgium

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Left to right: Maria Cuahutle, Erika Greenberg-Schneider, Carmela Zabala and Laurent Baarslag in the printmaking studio of the Program in Graphic Design.

USF St. Petersburg's first student exchange program began with an unexpected phone call from Belgium three years ago.

Erika Greenberg-Schneider, a visiting instructor at USF St. Petersburg's Graphic Design Program who is such a renowned printmaker she was honored by France as a Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters, was at her studio in Tampa when the phone rang.

Would she agree to be the keynote speaker at a major art event in Liege, Belgium? The caller was a professor at École Supérieure des Arts Saint-Luc de Liège, so before she said yes she

asked if the acclaimed art school would be interested in a student exchange program with USF St. Petersburg.

And so began a long journey that ended last fall with USFSP graphic design seniors Carmela Zabala and Maria Cuahutle living and studying in Belgium for the semester and continues this spring with Belgium student Laurent Baarslag living and studying here.

“I think the students are gaining an immense amount from this,” said Greenberg-Schneider. “This is a real occasion for them to go out and explore. It’s really good for them to experience other countries and cultures.”

Zabala said the semester in Liege had a profound impact. “I learned a lot,” she said. “I became a better designer through it. I’ve seen my work mature. Looking at my work now and looking at it before, it’s just very different.” She wrote about her experiences in ['burg Blogs](#).

Cuahutle agrees. “It was a growing experience personally,” she said. “It made me question what I wanted to do. It was eye opening.” It also gave her a new appreciation for the USFSP Graphic Design Program “The program is really good here,” she said. “It’s top notch.” And it bolstered her confidence and independence.

For Baarslag, the decision to spend this semester at USF St. Petersburg has been one of the best he has made. “It’s a big opportunity to be here,” he said. There is a spirit of teamwork in the program, he says, a lot of energy and focus. “Here it is more intense,” he said. “We work a lot more here.”

Zabala and Cuahutle stayed in private homes and Baarslag is staying with a couple of fellow USFSP graphic design students. The living arrangements are one of the best parts of the exchange program, the students say, because it immerses them in the culture and helps them learn the language and local customs.

While this is the first USFSP’s first student exchange program but likely not the last.

“This inaugural exchange program shows the extraordinary efforts the university is taking to prepare global citizens for the 21st century,” said Frank Biafora, Ph.D., dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. “This is a model for other programs that could develop out of this.”

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