



Háskólinn
á Akureyri
University
of Akureyri



March 23, 2015

Cooperative agreement extends WKU international reach to the Arctic

In simultaneous ceremonies just over 60 miles from the Arctic Circle in Iceland and in Bowling Green, Western Kentucky University (WKU), the University of Akureyri (UNAK) and the Icelandic Arctic Cooperation Network (IACN) signed an academic and research agreement Monday that solidifies the North Atlantic Climate Change Collaboration (NAC³) project.

The innovative agreement signed by the academic and research partners will center on academic exchanges and joint course offerings, research initiatives, capacity building, economic development activities, and service-learning. The NAC³ project aims to focus on academic exchange, course development and collaborative research in the areas of climate change, climate literacy, health and wellness, ocean dynamics, sustainability, informal public education, economic development, technology exchange, and water resources, among others. (Additional information about the project is available at www.wku.edu/iceland)

“University of Akureyri (UNAK) has set its focus on research in all aspects of the Arctic – with emphasis on both social and natural sciences and the interaction between the two when dealing with issues related to global climate change and local impact,” UNAK rector Dr. Eyjólfur Guðmundsson said. “Understanding the impact of climate change is a challenging task and can only be achieved through cross-disciplinary and international cooperation where each institution contributes its expertise to monitor, analyze and understand the future impact of these changes. This agreement between University of Akureyri, the Icelandic Arctic Cooperation Network and Western Kentucky University is a new and productive form of international cooperation for UNAK and we expect that through such close collaboration the institutions will be able to provide deeper understanding and offer better insights into reactions to global climate change.”

President Gary Ransdell led a WKU group to Iceland for the signing ceremony and other meetings.

“What started as a climate change study abroad course last summer in Iceland has evolved into a major collaboration with multiple Icelandic institutions to study the international effects of climate change and global warming,” Dr. Ransdell said. “We are grateful to our new partners at the University of Akureyri, which is located in

northern Iceland just over 60 miles from the Arctic Circle. We are also inspired by the support we have received from several Icelandic governmental officials who understand the effects of climate change and the value WKU faculty and students can bring to our shared pursuit of remediation and solutions to climate change. This is a long-term partnership which further extends WKU's international reach while strengthening our teaching and research in highly relevant ways.”

Other members of the WKU team visiting Iceland included Scholar in Residence Dr. Bernie Strenecky and faculty members Dr. Jason Polk and Dr. Leslie North of the Department of Geography and Geology.

Rector Guðmundsson, IACN Director Embla Eir Oddsdóttir, faculty and staff from both institutions and Akureyri government officials were present at the signing ceremony in Iceland. Members of the UNAK campus community and surrounding city of Akureyri were also in attendance, while members from WKU and affiliated parties participated simultaneously in real-time in Kentucky using video teleconference technology.

“At the Icelandic Arctic Cooperation Network, we are delighted to be involved in such an important initiative and to be a part of such a strong team of committed people,” Oddsdóttir said. “This kind of broad collaboration promises to contribute to the necessary development of interdisciplinary research and education in approaching the complex dynamics of climate change and the inherent uncertainties. Furthering interdisciplinary, interregional and intercultural collaboration is vital in addressing the mounting challenges communities -- in all regions of the world -- are faced with. Impacts of climate change are felt at both local and global levels and will require robust cooperation between various stakeholders involved, as well as reconciliation and negotiation of multiple perspectives, be they economic, social, cultural or environmental. “

Participating in the Bowling Green ceremony were Orn Gudmundsson, the Honorary Consul from Iceland to the Central United States; his son, Orn Gudmundsson Jr.; and members of the WKU community including Director of Sponsored Programs Nancy Mager, Department Head of Geography and Geology Dr. David Keeling, and Ogden College of Science and Engineering Dean Dr. Cheryl Stevens.

Gudmundsson, who has the unique position of being a member of both cultures, spoke in English and Icelandic about the importance of the agreement to Iceland and Kentucky. He indicated that potential outcomes from it would advance education and cooperation between the partners and the two cultures, while also encouraging interdisciplinary global problem solving.

The signed agreement is part of an evolving synergy that stemmed initially from a WKU study abroad course in June 2014. The course's theme was “A Climate Change Challenge” and nearly 60 faculty, staff and students participated aboard the Semester at Sea MV Explorer on a voyage to visit several countries in Europe and

Scandinavia. This program combined interdisciplinary learning, service learning, and international understanding in a way that strove to prepare the leaders of tomorrow with the skills to address climate change challenges. Together, the group learned how climate and environmental changes affect the world from varied academic perspectives and how more often than not these perspectives are closely interrelated.

Preceding Monday's signing ceremony in Akureyri, members of WKU and UNAK held a short dedication ceremony where a plaque was given to UNAK on behalf of WKU students and The \$100 Solution for the apple "Tree of Change" planted on their campus. Each student on the June 2014 voyage participated in The \$100 Solution™ service-learning course in addition to their discipline specific course (change science and communication, economics, future trends, or education). As part of the service-learning course, each class revealed plans for their projects. These included adopting a glacier and donating to the Extreme Ice Survey, developing an online platform for the dissemination of a climate change curriculum, purchasing a carbon offset, and planting a climate "Tree of Change" at the University of Akureyri. To reciprocate the latter symbol of climate change cooperation, two sister apple trees were planted on WKU's campus in October 2014 and together they will serve as meeting points for future discussions about climate change.

The initial visit and continued interactions described above fostered a burgeoning relationship between WKU, the University of Akureyri and the Icelandic Arctic Cooperation Network. From the beginning, Honorary Consul Gudmundsson and his son, Orn Gudmundsson, Jr., provided valuable assistance and advisement by coordinating government support from Iceland and by guiding the collaboration on several fronts. The resulting outcome, solidified in part through the MOA, is now known as the North Atlantic Climate Change Collaboration (NAC³) and aims to provide a platform for interdisciplinary research and teaching.

Project leaders Strenecky, North, Mager and Polk visited Iceland last October to work on the MOA particulars and through those discussions set in motion the first tangible outcomes planned for after its signing, which will occur in the next few months. These include a joint course in Iceland set for this summer (June 2015) that will focus on the climate change theme and include both WKU and UNAK faculty and students. A special two-day research workshop in mid-June will directly follow the course. During the workshop, members from the partnering institutions will gather to identify funding opportunities for areas of mutual interest and high priority. They will begin collaborations and seek support for student engagement in research, the development of internship programs, faculty and student exchange, and to conduct cutting-edge interdisciplinary international research projects. Eventually, collaborators from the Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre, who will also partake in the June research workshop, will join the collaboration to explore problems and solutions at both spectrums of the North Atlantic Ocean and globally.

The University of Akureyri (Háskólinn á Akureyri) is located in North Iceland and has served Akureyri and its rural surrounding since 1987. The University has built a reputation for academic excellence and good industrial relations. Located in the capital of North Iceland, Akureyri, the University has been instrumental in the economic growth of the region and is central in the planning for a future as a knowledge based society. The University of Akureyri prepares students for a wide range of opportunities in both the private and the public sectors. Education offered by the University aims at providing its graduates with specific skills and knowledge of scientific methods as well as theoretical skills that will enable them to improve their qualifications. Education and research are closely linked to achieve this, first and foremost by assigning equal importance to them in the daily work of the academic and scientific staff and whenever possible course work is based on research. The University is at present operating in three Schools; School of Business and Science, School of Humanities and Social Sciences and School of Health Sciences. The number of students is around 1,800 and members of staff number around 180.

The Icelandic Arctic Cooperation Network, also located in Akureyri, works closely with UNAK and their goal is to facilitate cooperation amongst Icelandic public and private organizations, institutions, businesses and bodies involved in Arctic issues – among other things in research, education, innovation and monitoring, or other activity relevant to the Arctic region. Some of the primary activities include enhancing and facilitating communication and cooperation within Iceland regarding Arctic issues, enhancing visibility of the role and work of public and private institutions and organizations in Iceland involved in Arctic issues, and providing information and resources concerning Icelandic activities, knowledge, and experience in Arctic issues to academia, policy makers and the public.

Climate change is a major challenge facing the world of today and the future. The implications of this global phenomenon are far-reaching and will impact every person on the Earth. Political, economic and social complications will need to be addressed with the increasing changes climate variability will cause to Earth's natural systems. The signing of this agreement highlights recognition of the need for leaders well versed in interdisciplinary learning and research, along with international cooperation, to address these inevitable problems. As changes in the Arctic become more prevalent, the global implications will be widespread and result in the need for a diverse approach to building resilience and finding adaptation strategies. Collectively, the partnering institutions hope the MOA provides a foundation to foster learning and research experiences for current and future generations of students to build the skills needed to take on this climate change challenge.

Media contacts

In Iceland: Kristjana Hákonardóttir, kristjana@unak.is

In Bowling Green: Bob Skipper, bob.skipper@wku.edu or (270) 745-4295