PROGRAM TAKES STUDENTS out of their element AND INTO NEW EXPERIENCES

National Student Exchange Program allows students to experience diversity in the U.S.

When the first measurable amount of snow fell on Eastern Illinois University's campus in December 2007, 22-year-old Bradley Hill stayed outdoors for hours — even though it was the weekend before finals.

"We've had snowball fights, I built a snowman, I tackled a snowman," the young native Texan said. "It's been absolutely great!"

Meanwhile, Tiara Fulton, a native of Bourbonnais, Ill., was preparing to make her way home for the holidays from near Houston, where temperatures had been hovering between 65 and 85 degrees for the past few days. "I didn't want to be cold," she said, partially explaining her decision to attend Prairie View A&M University for a year.

"Students may participate for any number of reasons — and do," she added, reflecting on Eastern's first year as a participating school in the 40-year-old program. (EIU joined Illinois State University and Northeastern Illinois University during the 2007-2008 school year as the only three participating schools in the state.)

Through the NSE, nearly 4,000 undergraduate students study for up to one year at another participating location. The program was founded as a counterpart to study abroad programs.

"It's a wonderful middle step to study abroad," Irwin said. "Our students who may not have the financial resources to spend a semester or school year abroad can still study out-of-state for about the same price (tuition and fees) they would pay to attend Eastern.

"Or it can build confidence in those students who might want to study abroad, but who aren't quite sure they're ready personally," she added. Fulton, a junior communication studies major, said she had always wanted to study abroad, but yet was reluctant when she considered the distance she'd have to travel alone. "When I learned about NSE, I said, 'Alright, I can do this. I'm still in the U.S.A.'"

Her choice of Prairie View A&M was based on the size of the campus (small), its location (the South), and the fact that it was listed among Histori-
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..typically Black Colleges and Universities, institutions of higher education in the U.S. that were established before 1964 with the intention of serving the African-American community. Prairie View, a member of the Texas A&M University system, was founded in 1876, and is the second oldest state-sponsored institution of higher education in Texas.

“I love it here,” Fulton said. “But at first, it was a culture shock. It’s all African-American; I wasn’t used to that. Even in my high school, there was about a 50/50 mix.”

Fulton also found the Houston-area campus to have a unity “like no other – so welcoming, so passionate.”

In fact, Fulton – who was initially enrolled for the Fall 2007 semester only – extended her stay for the full academic year after being named Prairie View’s 2007-2008 homecoming queen.

“TIARA FULTON OF BOURBONNAIS, Ill., a National Student Exchange participant from Eastern, is attending Prairie View A&M University in Prairie View, Texas, for a year.

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- Bradley Hill

“That was the best,” Fulton said. “So many hugs and so much support. When my year’s up, it will be hard to leave, but I do miss Eastern. That’s still home.”

According to Irvin, Fulton was one of eight EIU students who chose to participate in NSE during its first year of program participation. That in itself was an outstanding response, she said.

But what pleased organizers, too, was the one student who chose to come to Eastern.

“When we began discussing this program, everyone came to the table – admissions, financial aid, housing, the deans of each of the colleges... We were so excited about participating,” Irvin said. “But we also knew that the Midwest is not the most popular choice for students.”

Hill, a junior from Texas State University-San Marcos, acknowledged that Eastern’s close proximity to Indianapolis was the major selling point in his decision to attend the smaller campus for a year. “My grandparents live in Indianapolis, so I get to see them once or twice a month,” he said.

But other attributes of the Charleston campus have shone through since his arrival.

“At first, I was apprehensive. I didn’t know what to expect. (But) I’ve loved it since I’ve been here,” Hill said. “Everyone is so friendly. I’m definitely making some new friends. And the classes are small – I have six students in one class.

The student/teacher relationship is not as great (at Texas State) as it is here.”

Hill also finds Eastern to be a good school in which to get involved. He joined the university’s men’s rugby team, something he participated in at Texas State, and has also pledged a fraternity – something he never thought he would do.

“I find myself being more open about myself here,” Hill said. “I’m more outgoing, doing things I thought I’d never do.”

The engineering technology major returned to Eastern for the Spring 2008 semester after a brief holiday break back home in Austin where, he said in December, his mother reported that it was 77 degrees outside.

“They’re in shorts and T-shirts,” Hill said. “Here, I’m enjoying opening the windows and feeling the cold.”