

By Grace I. Virtue, Ph.D.

The Trans-Atlantic Graduate Exchange Program:

Race, Ethnicity and Migration Studies (REMS)

Among the defining characteristics of the 21st century to date is the mass migration of people across the globe. Fuelled by advances in travel and information technology, people have never been so eager, ready and able to crisscross continents in search of jobs, goods, services or simply for leisure.

Statistics show that 2006 was one of the biggest travel years in history, with record breaking trips across continents. Africa, an increasingly popular destination with its vast acres of unspoiled forests, saw its numbers increase by more than eight percent during 2006. In the United States, as a result of the higher minority birth rates and migration from elsewhere in the Americas, African-American and Latino communities are expected to collectively outnumber the White population by mid-century.

Scholars, interest groups and policymakers recognize that while mass movement of people across continents brings with it the constant interchange of ideas, cultures, norms, belief systems and generally rewarding experiences, it also brings tremendous potential for conflict.

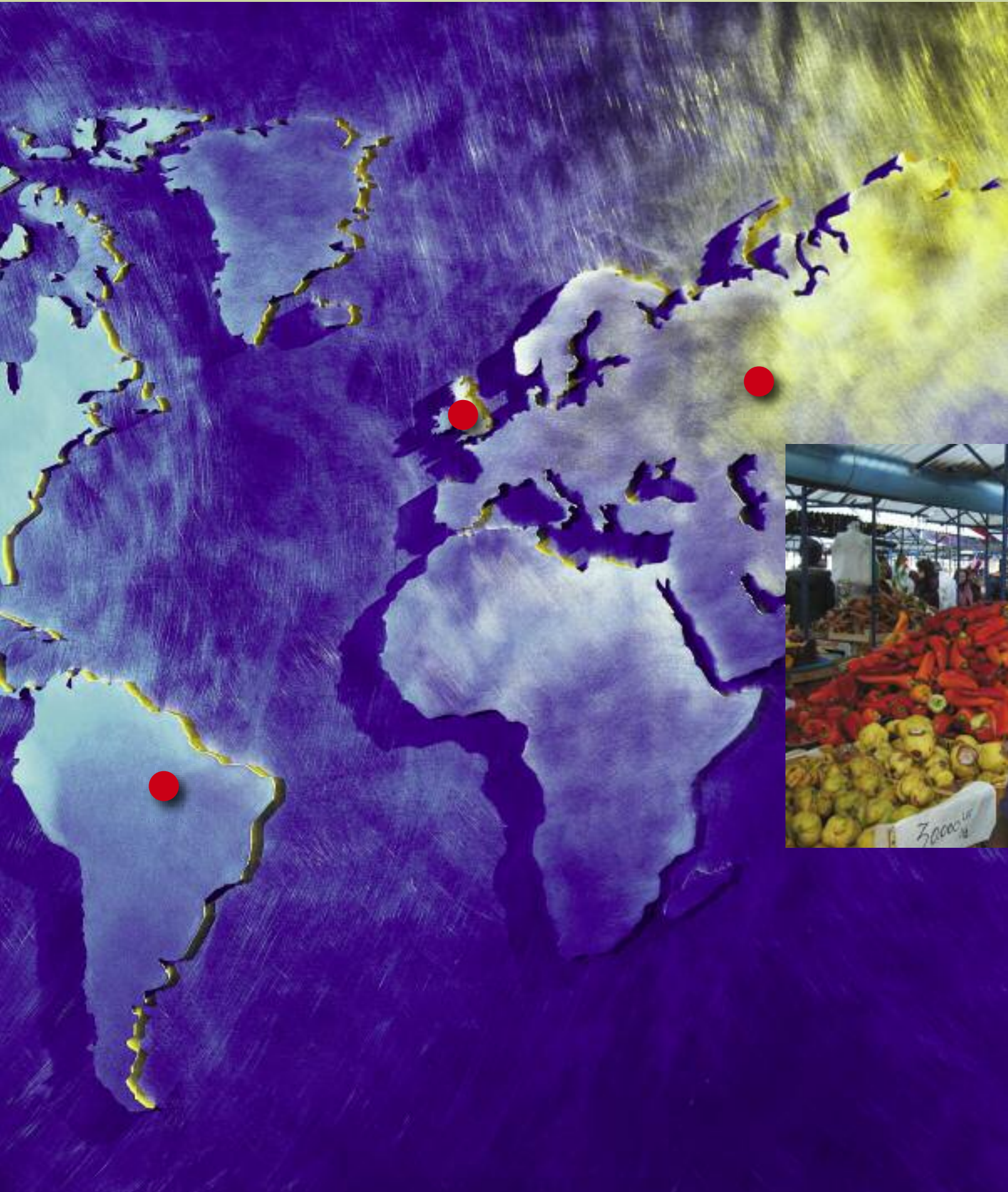
Hence, the need for more concerted efforts to study the phenomenon, promote dialogue and foster understanding.

The Trans-Atlantic Graduate Exchange Program on Race, Ethnicity and Migration Studies (REMS) at Howard University is part of a seven-institution consortium funded by the Directorate General for Education and Culture of the European Commission and the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education of the U.S. Department of Education (FIPSE). The program was designed to promote exchanges between institutions in the United States and Europe.

The consortium partners three American universities — Howard University, University of Texas, El Paso, and Vanderbilt University — and four European universities — Central European University (Hungary), Universidade Coimbra (Portugal), University of Edinburgh (United Kingdom) and Utrecht University (The Netherlands). The consortium develops courses and certificate programs around the themes of race relations, ethnicity and migration studies, drawing on the expertise of faculty from all seven institutions.

“Immigration, and how to deal with it, is one of the most challenging issues we face in the United States today — especially immigration by people of color. They are coming in large numbers and there is certainly the

Howard political science graduate student Solace Duncan studied at the Central European University in Hungary through the REMS program.





Anca Minescu, a partner in the REMS program, is a research assistant for the faculty of social sciences at Utrecht University.

"If we truly want to be leaders of our time, we have to face the challenges of our time and we have to keep moving to the front. For young scholars, in particular, it is of imminent importance to learn from first-hand experience and, in a comparative way, learn how research is conducted and the groundwork for social policies is laid and argued for, on both sides of the Atlantic," says G.B. Dielissen.

potential for significant political, economic or social problems — hate crimes, for example," says Orlando Taylor, Ph.D., dean of the Graduate School and Howard University's lead investigator on the project.

Pointing out that this was not an issue unique to the United States; Taylor says the REMS program is designed to bring together several perspectives on international and ethnic relations, from disciplines such as sociology, political science and anthropology. Taylor feels that this multidisciplinary perspective is particularly important to the success of the program.

"Many countries in Europe are facing these challenges too," says Taylor. "These issues are, in part, the fruits of colonialism. Advances in international travel have made it easier for people to move around and so you have former colonists flocking to the 'motherland' in numbers never before seen. At the same time, there are great dissimilarities in language, culture, religion and customs. REMS allows Howard students to study these issues from a global perspective."

Changing Perspectives

Professor G.B. Dielissen, exchange project organizer and coordinator from Utrecht University, agrees. "Higher education — the grooming of young scholars, in particular, — is about opening one's mind; disciplining oneself to look beyond the familiar; learning how to change perspectives and 'taking the role of the other,'" says Dielissen.

Looking at the problem from a different perspective, Dielissen says, allows scholars to see how issues that accompany the process of migration and resettlement are experienced and dealt with in different contexts. Studying these problems across the Atlantic then becomes an opportunity to not only learn about a new country, but also about the peculiarities of one's own society; thereby creating a better understanding of how one's own attitude is shaped.

Dielissen sees migration as more than just a physical move. "When people become upwardly mobile and educate themselves to become the new generations of leaders of their community — this too can be seen as a kind of migration: one moves out of what one knows, away from what is familiar, and has to accustom oneself to a whole new world of opportunities and expectations," says Dielissen.

According to Dielissen, the longer the journey, the stronger the inclination to slow down and hang on to the newly conquered environment. While this may be a very human reaction, it is not "a luxury that the advancement of science and the education of scholars can afford."

"To stay mobile and to learn from new environments is what keeps our minds flexible and sharp," says Dielissen. "If we truly want to be leaders of our time, we have to face the challenges of our time and we have to keep moving to the front. For young scholars, in particular, it is of



imminent importance to learn from first-hand experience and, in a comparative way, learn how research is conducted and the groundwork for social policies is laid and argued for, on both sides of the Atlantic."

Howard Students Gain Global Knowledge

Solace Duncan, a graduate student in the Department of Political Science, epitomizes the undergirding philosophy of the REMS program. A native of Connecticut, the public administration major journeyed last year to the Central European University in Hungary for a three-month exchange. Abandoning the comforts of her surrounding for a country where she thought she would be an outsider, and without the facility to speak a single word of the native language, Duncan accepted the challenge.

"I found that the University was similar to Howard in many ways. In a country that is emerging out of the fall of Communism, a part of the university's goal is to expose people to the benefits of a free society. So, in a way, it is like Reconstruction. Howard emerged out of a similar context following the Civil War," says Duncan.

Duncan says she felt no hostility and enjoyed her experience, relying strictly on the few Hungarian words she eventually learned and the English skills of people with whom she came into contact. "It was absolutely dynamite," she says. "It has been very useful."

Ultimately, Duncan is one of 21 students from the United States and the same number of Europeans who participate in the program, which is designed to give students greater theoretical knowledge and research and pave the way for long-term collaboration. REMS also develops a common graduate level curriculum on race, ethnicity and migration studies including the perspectives of the African Diaspora, the United States Latino community and the Native American community, as well as various European contexts, and will publish joint research papers by American and European authors.

Anca Minescu, research assistant for the faculty of social sciences at Utrecht University, sums up the program this way: "There is much to learn about both the problems and the solutions that have become traditions of thought and practice on both sides of the Atlantic. A more cooperative approach that tries to avoid the insularity of disciplines and geographical locations is the way to go in the future." [H](#)

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Orlando Taylor, Ph.D., dean of the Graduate School, is the lead investigator of the REMS program.