The Search for Common Ground: Culture in California’s Central Valley

Modesto Junior College (MJC), an Hispanic-Serving Institution, proposes a two-year project for faculty in English, philosophy, history, anthropology, and humanities to study cultural identity issues of California’s Central Valley, and develop curricula grounded in the rich cultural background of its students. The Search for Common Ground project provides a unique opportunity to examine as a whole the practices, artifacts, art, and traditions of a multi-cultural community and enrich community college humanities content to reflect the lives of its students.

The aim of this project is to foster discussion that critically explores the rich cultural heritage, daily life, and struggles of those who live in California’s Central Valley—particularly migrant, refugee and low-income workers who have come here from all over the world. Interdisciplinary classroom content will be developed based on the poetics of local cultural heritages and regionally-lived experiences, making the humanities more relevant to community college students. Curriculum that reflects students’ experience will move them to discover how the humanities can serve as an avenue for expressing, discussing and understanding themselves and the cultural context for their lives in California’s Central Valley.

The Common Ground project will unfold in three phases over a two-year period:

**Phase I: January 2015 – May 2016. Interdisciplinary Study**
- A) Faculty cohort exploration of local cultural resources (universities, museums, events)
- B) Seven Seminars (readings, lectures, discussions, cultural visits – Visiting scholars, authors, artists, and experts will lead discussions with humanities faculty)
- C) Development of twenty-five Common Ground curricular modules

**Phase II: September 2015 – August 2016. Development and Deeper Engagement**
- A) Seminars and curricular development continue
- B) Ten Cross-disciplinary course lectures and cross-course dialogue
- C) Symposium planning and website development

**Phase III: August 2016 – December 2016. Dissemination of the Model**
- A) Five outside conference presentations by Common Ground Faculty Cohort (CGFC) members in their respective disciplines at conferences across the United States
- B) Common Ground Symposium (14 regional two-and four-year colleges participating)
- C) Curriculum in fifteen courses is revised to incorporate instructional modules

Seven identified topics will frame seminars, cultural visits and discussions, including: Concepts of Home and Identity in the Central Valley; Multiculturalism, Examining the Politics of Recognition; How Food Shapes Culture; Hispanic Immigration and Assimilation; Local Arts and Film of the Valley; Working Class Culture in the Valley; and Using Visual Anthropology: Exploring Valley Memories. Each seminar will be led by an eminent scholar with particular expertise and includes readings, cultural visits, discussion, and the development of curricular modules. The Search for Common Ground project will produce seminar outlines, reading lists, curriculum, and resource material that can be shared with community college and university Humanities faculty.