LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION
I recently returned from visiting Florence, Italy, where I attended a consortium meeting of colleges and universities associated with the Studio Art Centers International (SACI). (I know what you are thinking: These deans have a tough job.) Drake was SACI’s founding member in the late 1970s. Over the years, we have sent students for a semester or year abroad experience, and next summer Ben Gardner, assistant professor of art and design, will be leading a group of Drake students to spend a summer term at SACI. Few places can offer a student the opportunity to spend a morning meticulously restoring a bronze pot from the sixth century B.C. and an afternoon designing fashion statements for the runway. I was thinking about this very purposeful use of the resources of location on my long flight back to Des Moines as the answer to MOOCs.

NOWHERE MAN
And what, you reasonably ask, is a MOOC? If you have not been following higher education news, MOOC is an acronym for massive open online course. As the title suggests, they are “open”—that is, anyone, anywhere can take the course, whether one is affiliated with a college or university or not, whether one is age 12 or 70. Second, MOOCs are free. No fees, no tuition. Third, because they are open and free, they are “massive”—tens of thousands of people will enroll in a MOOC. MOOCs are evolving quickly, with some universities partnering with corporations to offer MOOCs for credit (and a price). The challenge to a residential college like Drake is obvious. Why should a student come to college to take an art history, economics, or computer science course when she can take one taught by a famous Ivy League professor online, at minimal cost, from literally anywhere in the world? Indeed, one Stanford professor speculated that in 50 years, only 10 institutions would deliver higher education worldwide.

I don’t think so. While MOOCs do pose a challenge—and an opportunity—they will not supplant the residential college experience. What MOOCs cannot do—yet—is provide quality experiential learning for students. Experiential learning is characteristic of a Drake education, from studios and labs to field experiences and service-learning to internships and capstones. In fact, more than 78 percent of Drake students participate in a practicum, internship, or field experience by the time they graduate. And we are also getting very good at using local resources, whether here in Des Moines or elsewhere, to provide experiences that are immediate and impactful—and unobtainable online. Let me give you some examples.

WRITING ON THE MARGINS
In 2009, Carol Spaulding-Kruse, professor of English, experimented with “service writing,” an approach to teaching writing that engages students with their community and increases student awareness of local needs and issues while at the same time using their services as writers to benefit others. That year, 12 student interns obtained placement at various nonprofit social service agencies in the Des Moines area for a period of five weeks, assisting with grant writing, communications, press releases, proposals, website management, and correspondence.

Since then, the experiment has grown into a program for which students receive internship credit or course credit in service writing. The writing internship program places 25–30 interns each year with various community partners, from the Iowa Food Cooperative to the Polk County Health Department to the Blank Park Zoo. Nonprofit organizations can elevate the quality and quantity of their written materials, while students receive class credit and invaluable experience using their writing skills in a meaningful way.

This is community engagement at its best, a symbiotic relationship between the city and the University from which both mutually benefit. And what better experience can students obtain than by seeing directly the usefulness, immediacy, and relevance of writing?
MR. (AND MS.) SMITH GO TO WASHINGTON

Here at Drake we make much of being at the crossroads of presidential politics. And, as you have read in Drake Blue and elsewhere, our students get multiple opportunities to intern, work, volunteer, and assist in campaigns, media coverage, and the debates hosted by Drake. But Des Moines and Iowa are not the only places for these opportunities. We have connections in high places. Due to our relationship with The Washington Center and the initiative of Rachel Paine Caufield, associate professor of politics, 25 students traveled to Washington, D.C., for the presidential inauguration in January as part of our new January Term (J-Term) courses. Students attended The Washington Center academic seminar in the mornings and used afternoons to explore D.C. They visited the White House (courtesy of Zachary Nunn, AS ’02, director of cybersecurity for the National Security staff), the Supreme Court, National Public Radio, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the National Archives, the Brookings Institution, the State Department, and congressional offices (courtesy of a number of alumni who work on Capitol Hill) and attended the inauguration and its celebratory events. They also squeezed in some community service with So Others Might Eat.

The students’ final project will be a documentary compiling their best online work (excerpts from their blogs), interviews with guest speakers, information about their site visits, interviews from the inauguration concert and the inauguration, and commentary about their experiences. Visit www.drakeindc.com to see it all.

UNDER THE TUSCAN SUN

The example of The Washington Center nicely illustrates the importance of having established relationships with other organizations and institutions. Politics may be local, as the saying goes, but citizenship—and education—is global. And that brings us back to SACI and to Ben Gardner’s summer course, titled, appropriately, Mapping Experience. Students will use the rich resources of SACI to immerse themselves in Florence and the region of Tuscany. In addition to maintaining a blog that will serve as a travelogue and idea journal, students will create a map of their experiences in Florence, locating those places and the connections between them that are contributing in a meaningful way to their artistic, intellectual, cultural, and personal development. Here once more is a learning experience that cannot happen in a virtual world—one that is dependent upon the physical space only offered by institutions like Drake University.

THERE’S A PLACE FOR US

This is why I think there will always be a place for Drake in higher education, and why I think Drake’s prominence as an institution of higher learning can only increase. Whether interning in Des Moines, dancing at an inaugural ball in Washington, or learning fresco painting in Florence, Italy, these experiences illustrate the exceptional learning environment Drake strives to provide—giving students a sense of place, in all meanings of that phrase. Experiences connect students to their communities, underscore that learning is experiential (and lifelong), and give students a sense of purpose—personally, professionally, and as citizens of the world.