

salute to scholars

CUNY 2017 • STUDENT AWARD RECIPIENTS

*Chinese Flagship Program's
Boren Scholarship Winners*

A SPECIAL TRIBUTE

Award-Winning CUNY Students

Top Academic Honors for Hundreds of Scholars





Ensuring Fluency for the Next Generation of Global Professionals

SIX YEARS AGO, Hunter College launched its Chinese Flagship program, part of a federal initiative to develop a national corps of young global professionals who can speak, with flawless fluency, languages that are “critical to American competitiveness and security.”

The Chinese Flagship program at Hunter is now one of just 12 in the country and the only one in New York State. Its students live together in a dormitory where they speak more Mandarin than

English. They spend semesters in China and graduate with a coveted skill and rare experience that leads them into international careers in government, business and public service.

“They conduct high-level discussions and read and write in their professional domains.”

And a quarter of the 38 students who have been in the program — four this year — have been named

— *Flagship Program Director Der-lin Chao*

winners of a prestigious scholarship by the federal office that supports the nation’s Chinese Flagship programs and others at universities across the country in some 60 foreign languages.

The Boren Scholarships are highly competitive awards from the National Security Education Program, and among this year’s 194 winners nationwide are a record five CUNY students – the four in Hunter’s Chinese Flagship program and a fifth from the Macaulay Honors College at Queens College

— Yelena Suponya
Macaulay Honors College at Hunter College

— Jacob Kessler
Macaulay Honors College at Hunter College

— Omar Albert
Hunter College

— David O’Connor
Macaulay Honors College at Hunter College

Boren Scholars in Chinatown

who is studying Arabic.

What is perhaps most remarkable about the Chinese Flagship's 2017 Boren winners is that they all began studying Mandarin almost by chance and quickly found it life-changing. Jacob Kessler happened to see a student writing Chinese characters one day when he was a sophomore, and now he's preparing to leave for a year of study in Beijing. Yelena Suponya took up the language after her mother suggested it during a free week before her freshman year. David O'Connor had friends who were learning Chinese and seemed to be enjoying it, undeterred by a language that has no alphabet. Omar Albert, meanwhile, was actually drawn by the difficulty: "Once I found that Chinese was so hard," he says, "I fell in love with it."

This year's winner from Queens College is Frances Raybaud, a sophomore who is as passionate about Arabic as the Hunter students are about Chinese. She will study as a Boren

scholar in Morocco.

The four Boren winners from Hunter are the latest triumph for the six-year-old Chinese Flagship program. Two Hunter students captured Borens to study in China in 2016 and four others were named winners in 2013 and 2014.

"Our program combines language learning and study of international relations and national security topics," says Der-lin Chao, the professor who heads Hunter's Chinese program and has directed the Flagship since it began in 2011. "The first thing is they must be interested in pursuing government public service, focusing on China and U.S. relationships."

Because students come in with no prior experience, Chao said, "Our challenge is to bring up students' proficiency from zero to an advanced level so they can study and work with the Chinese in China." Few universities offer language programs designed for that level of intensity or connect to international affairs, she said.

The Boren Scholar-

The prestigious fellowship is named for David L. Boren, who as a U.S. senator was principal author of the legislation that created the National Security Education Program.

— **Frances Raybaud**
Macaulay Honors College
at Queens College
Boren Scholarship



“The internships allow them to interact with professionals in China, build a network and get to know the etiquette and culture in the work environment.” – *Flagship Program Director Der-lin Chao*

ships, worth up to \$20,000 each, come with a one-year commitment to work in national security for the federal government, which may lead to a career in government service. The prestigious award is named for David L. Boren, who as a U.S. senator from Oklahoma was principal author of the legislation that created the National Security Education Program in 1991. He is now president of the University of Oklahoma.

Under the National Security Education Program, the government supports undergraduate and graduate students who study one of more than 60 mostly non-Western European languages including Amharic, Kurdish, Tagalog, spoken in the Philippines, and Twi, spoken in West Africa. There are Flagship programs at other universities focused on Arabic, Hindi, Korean, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, Swahili, Turkish and Urdu. The Department of Defense administers the program.

For students in the Chinese Flagship, the language and culture of China become integral to their lives. “They conduct high-level discussions and read and write in their professional domains,” Chao said. “They will be tested in China to track their language growth, and their goal is to reach superior level, which is near-native.”

Besides taking on a demanding and rigorous language program, Flagship students are all double majors. Boren applicants must write statements that relate their research interests to national security issues. This year’s winners are pursuing fields ranging from economics to environment.

Kessler, O’Connor and Suponya are in Macaulay Honors College and expect to graduate in 2018. They and Albert live on a floor for Flagship students in a Hunter dormitory where they speak Chinese as much as possible.

“A lot of people who learn languages consider themselves language nerds, getting lost in the history between the words, but that isn’t me. What I love is using language as a tool to communicate.”

– *Jacob Kessler*

Kessler will attend Beijing Union University to study Mandarin and other subjects for two semesters so that he can get “the maximum amount of language instruction possible. I started studying Chinese late, as a sophomore.” He also will have a part-time internship in the spring.

The other students will study at Nanjing University, taking language and other courses in the fall and working in full-time internships in the spring, also in China.

“The internships allow them to interact with professionals in China, build a network and get to know the etiquette and culture in the work environment,” Chao explains.

Albert, who is in the Thomas Hunter Honors Program, started in CUNY’s SEEK program, which supports students with weak high school preparation. Having lost both parents, he has lived on his own since his mid-teens.

As a freshman, he met a Chinese Flagship student who

There is a floor in the Hunter College dormitory for Flagship students, and all four of the Boren scholars live there, where they speak Chinese as much as possible.

had just returned from Taiwan. Chao listened to him talk about the program and decided to sign on. “I love challenges, and Hunter’s program guarantees fluency.” Albert had previously won a State Department Critical Language Scholarship to study Mandarin in Changchun, China, in the summer of 2015, and he may pursue an MBA following his year of government service.

Kessler began studying Hebrew at age 5 and attended a Jewish high school on Long Island. At Hunter, he minored in Arabic and studied in Jordan during a winter break. “A lot of people who learn languages consider themselves language nerds, getting lost in the history between the words, but that isn’t me,” he says. “What I love is using language as a tool to communicate.” He studied in Beijing last summer and in Taiwan last fall.

Albany native O’Connor credits his grasp of Mandarin to the one-on-one tutoring that Chinese Flagship provides new students. “The way they teach is effective,” he says, comparing it with the way he learned French in France during

a gap year after high school. “Learning to speak is similar, but learning to read and write Chinese is very difficult, since they don’t have an alphabet. But if you study in an organic manner, it’s just a process of memorization.” He studied in Taiwan in the summer of 2015, interned with the Council on Foreign Relations in New York City and hopes for a placement with the State Department.

Suponya already has studied Mandarin in Taiwan and Beijing. “I find more and more things interesting about the language and the people and culture that make me stick with it,” she says. “The people are very honest and open, while Americans beat around the bush lots of times.” She foresees a career, perhaps at a policy institute, examining international relations and social and business trends. Suponya grew up speaking Russian at home, and she hopes to raise her command of that language to a professional level after she returns from China.

Frances Raybaud, the Macaulay/Queens sophomore, has a way to go in Arabic to match the proficiency of her Hunter peers. “I’m a high beginner,” she says. “My focus is building vocabulary and getting the grammar and writing, but I do have a good grasp on speaking.”

She initially hated the Arabic language when she tried it as a freshman, perhaps because of its difficulty. “And then I took a class in international relations. Because I was so interested in climate change and environmental science, I realized that the best place for me was the Middle East. They have so much sunlight and are running out of oil. I had to go back to Arabic, and then I fell in love with the language.”

She wants to see how Morocco is dealing with climate change. Seas are rising, drought blights agricultural areas and this oil-dependent country is going solar.

Rabaud holds U.S. and French citizenship and speaks French. She won Queens College’s Ibrahim Fellowship, which will take her through the Middle East in May to learn about conflicts, migrants and more. Her Boren-funded studies extend from June through December, at an Arabic-language school in Morocco’s capital, Rabat, and classes and interning in the historic city of Meknes.

She intends to go into the foreign service after graduate school in international relations.