"It's not as easy as I thought it was to get a whole bunch of people to agree."

Jasmine Wells, 18-year-old senior at Arundel High School

County's teenage diplomats

Education: Arundel high school students work in teams to represent nations and learn about international relations.

By Liz F. Kay
Sun Staff

Most teams probably engage in high-level negotiations only when debating with family members about curfews or use of a car.

But teams of students at Arundel and Broadneck high schools are grappling over global security and economics with their peers through the University of Maryland's International Communication and Negotiation Simulations, or ICONS, project.

The university's department of government and politics founded the project in 1991 so that college and high school students could explore political workings. Some executive training programs also use ICONS to teach conflict resolution, collaboration and negotiation.

Teams, each representing a country, discuss proposals for a hypothetical future summit via a Web-based messaging system. The goal is to get other countries to sign on to their proposals.

"It gets kids involved on a different level," said Arundel High School teacher Lisa Sigmone. Her international studies class represents Germany and China.

"They have to defend their points and defend their proposals with students all around the world," she said.

This semester, about 50 Anne Arundel students are participating, including a Broadneck team representing Turkey. More than 900 high school and college students from around the world took part this year, said ICONS director Kathleen Young.

Last month, Sigmone's class began researching three issues: economic security, global health and human security, which includes public health and refugee concerns.

Each team studies the perspectives of its country on the issues as well as the stance of the other countries participating in the simulation. A team from Brazil decided to represent the United States, Young said.

"Some of the countries have been really effective in deploying diplomatic knowledge," said senior Erin Miles, 18, of Crofton, who wants to become a diplomat.

She and several other students left their regular classes to monitor messages from the other countries during a conference last week. The skills are different from what's required to persuade people who are sitting in front of you, Sigmone said.

"It teaches them how to negotiate on global terms instead of them just talking to one person," Sigmon said.

And messages sometimes get misunderstood when they are typed through the ICONS messaging software instead of spoken by live people.

"Sometimes you have to be careful what you say. Things can be misunderstood," said senior Monica Kittleson, 18, of Odenton.

"You have to keep a certain amount of professionalism," said 18-year-old senior Jasmine Wells of Odenton.

The experience has made the students more conscious of the realities facing international bodies such as the United Nations.

The project "has shown how difficult it is to actually have these negotiations," said Ian Dinkin, a 17-year-old senior from Crofton. "It's difficult to establish communications with other countries for various reasons."

Wells said, "It's not as easy as I thought it was to get a whole bunch of people to agree on one thing. I thought it was going to be kind of easy to convince people to my way of thinking."