

Foreign Affairs:

International Partnerships Connect Students to a World of Business

By Karen Marley

It's no secret that building connections and relationships is a smart business practice. In today's fast-past, integrated economy these connections become vital signs for success. That is why the State University of New York at Geneseo (SUNY Geneseo) and Nazareth College have each created international business programs built around worldwide partnerships with universities, businesses, and in one case, an entire city. These innovative programs give students authentic experience and exposure in the field of international business and relations. Students develop cultural sensitivity, discover fresh ideas and approaches to problem solving while establishing valuable connections with other students and international enterprises.

Practical Experience

A few years ago, SUNY Geneseo was approached by Ciudad Hermana (Spanish for "sister city"), a task force of Metro Justice in Rochester, New York. The mayor of El Sauce, Nicaragua, a city sponsored by Ciudad Hermana, needed help with economic development. Funded by a three year grant from the Rochester International Development Council (RIDC) to promote international education, SUNY Geneseo selected four teams of students to travel to El Sauce to provide a wide range of business related services. Some of the services include teaching business education, English, computer skills, advising small businesses, increasing tourism capacity, and website development.

Mary Ellen Zuckerman, Dean of the Jones School of Business at SUNY Geneseo describes students' experience in El Sauce, "Students return transformed. Some discovered that ideas that work in theory are not entirely practical for the real world situation facing the El Sauce community. Students learn that access to capital is difficult and money flow is very different."

Nicaragua is a country where unemployment runs over 60 percent in many areas and the precious few jobs that are available often pay less than two dollars per day. The El Sauce initiative is mutually beneficial. Students apply the business skills and technical knowledge they have acquired in the States to help a community desperate for these services. "This is a phenomenal opportunity for our students and the community of El Sauce," says Zuckerman.

Students meet the challenge with enthusiasm. Those chosen to go must demonstrate the desire to learn along with the skills and technical ability to communicate large concepts to El Sauce business owners and residents. For example, El Sauce hosts a festival each January. Students help the local community capitalize on the festival's ability to promote tourism. Students have implemented ideas ranging from establishing bed & breakfasts to website expansion. Each team of students keeps careful notes and journals about their projects and experiences. Sequential teams use these notes to build on previous accomplishments.

"Students return feeling one or more of three things. They want to return to their host country, they want to continue working internationally, or they are able to transfer their skills and provide a sophisticated level of assistance to their business connections established here," explains Zuckerman. The El Sauce initiative is such a success that the university's provost has arranged for an exploratory trip to examine the feasibility of making El Sauce a site for a permanent program.

El Sauce is not the only beneficiary of SUNY Geneseo's international business program. The university created a dual economics degree program in partnership with Turkey. This particular initiative was designed to connect with the Turkish community in Rochester. Students spend their freshman and junior years in Turkey and their sophomore and senior years in Rochester. "Participants emerge better versed in international relations. There is an exchange of ideas, and exposure to how people with different background and skills approach things," says Zuckerman. The program, open to American and Turkish students, also nurtures business relationships. Whether students stay in Rochester or return to Turkey they have established knowledge and connections relevant to the local area.

Cultivating Connections

Nazareth College has also built an international business education program with a three year grant from RIDC. While SUNY Geneseo focused on creating an opportunity for their students to apply their skills, Nazareth College wants their students to strengthen the future of Rochester's economy by having them make connections abroad then bring these relationships back to the local business community.

Indeed, international business is alive and well in Rochester. It may be one of the pillars on which the future of Rochester's struggling economy depends. "Rochester is one of the leading exporting cities in the nation. Our business community and universities need to educate youth on the opportunities within the international business arena here in Rochester," explains Charlie Goodwin, former head of the International Business Council. The Nazareth program aims to do exactly that.

The RIDC grant gave Nazareth the funds to design a partnership programs in three global regions—Central Europe, Latin America, and Asia. During the last academic year students went to Hungary. A trip to Chile and Peru is planned for this academic year and students will go to China and India for the third year. There is no limit to the number of students who may attend but about fifteen students went to Hungary.

Prior to leaving, students attend local seminars conducted by leading authorities from overseas. Local businesses and professors from other universities are also invited to attend as learners. In these seminars students learn about the extensive international business opportunities here in Rochester and how to do business overseas. "You name it Rochester exports it—pharmaceuticals, office equipment, foods, chemicals, wine, high tech, the list goes on," says Goodwin.

George Eisen, Executive Director of International Education at Nazareth College has extensive experience in the design and management of international programs. "Nazareth's programs intend to provide global education for business. Students go to learn and gain exposure to international business and trade."

The Nazareth program is comprehensive. Recognizing that insight to a nation's culture, education, and business practices are all essential for successful global commerce, Eisen made sure to include exposure to all three. "Global education includes cultivating a cultural program," he says. To this end, students attended opera in Hungary. Attending the performing arts and visits to famous historical sites like Machu Picchu in Peru are being organized for the next two trips.

While abroad, Nazareth students attend seminars at various partner universities. Not only are the universities the best schools in a particular country, the seminars are often led by prominent

CEOs of that country. In addition to experiencing traditional learning environments abroad, students go on location to various enterprises with different management and ownership structures. In Hungary, students visited Hungarian owned enterprises as well as American owned businesses operating out of Hungary. Students also went to a porcelain factory fully owned by its workers. Afterwards, students could compare and contrast the different benefits, challenges, and nuances of each scenario.

In the Nazareth program students go to learn, yet at the same time they are acting as ambassadors from Rochester. Students are cultivating relationships and understanding how they can have an active career in international trade and commerce from Rochester. These relationships and partnerships work both ways. Nazareth has visiting delegations from India, Hungary and Peru. It is Eisen's hope that the attendees will develop local relationships, knowledge, and business opportunities and take them back to their home countries.

Eisen explains the necessity of partnerships. "A modern university has to serve the community. The community is our partner. That's the key to university success." He describes how everyone benefits. "Students establish close relationships with the business community in Rochester. They become connected here. It is my hope these programs will provide good education, retain students here, and be good for alumni."