Building a New University in Macedonia

**BY LEAH PECK**

The following is part of a larger history of IU’s international development activities being compiled under the direction of Patrick O’Meara, special assistant to President McRobbie and Vice President Emeritus for International Affairs. Leah Peck is completing her IU Ph.D. in higher education administration, and is assisting Dr. O’Meara in this project. The planning and development of South East European University is the subject of her dissertation.

The commitment to aid in the development of other higher education institutions abroad is a hallmark of IU’s service and global engagement. This engagement in international development is exemplified by IU’s involvement in the establishment of South East European University (SEEU), located in Tetovo, Macedonia. Originally founded in 2001 as a university to educate both the ethnic Albanian and Macedonian populations in Tetovo, SEEU has grown to be one of the most prestigious universities in Macedonia, and is gaining regional recognition as a premiere higher education institution.

After the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1995, the Republic of Macedonia had two public universities, but the language of instruction in higher education was exclusively Macedonian. Many ethnic Albanian citizens lacked either the skill in Macedonian language or the necessary elementary and secondary school background to succeed in these universities. Until 2001, roughly half of Albanian-speaking high school graduates applied for university places in recognized institutions, as opposed to 94 percent of the Macedonian-speaking majority. These universities did not teach anything in the Albanian language, and ethnic Albanian students comprised only 2–3 percent of student enrollment at each university.
Discussions among officials from the United States, the European Union, and member countries of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) led to the decision to establish a new university. South East European University was planned to be open to all, with a high quality infrastructure and with the Albanian, Macedonian, and English languages used for instruction. The major objectives of SEEU would be to establish quality academic programs based on international standards in pedagogy and curriculum and to increase access to higher education for the ethnic-Albanian minority.

Beginning in 2001, Charles Reafsnyder, then director of the Center for International Development and Education (CIEDA), and Dean of International Programs Patrick O’Meara saw in the building of a new university an opportunity to respond to Indiana University’s long-standing academic interest in the Balkans. In September 2001, USAID awarded Indiana University and the Indiana Consortium for International Programs a $2.235 million grant to assist the OSCE in SEEU’s development.

In late September of 2001, Dr. Paul Foster, an American academic and scholar of Macedonia with previous connections to IU, was hired by IU to be the Chief of Party for the project. Foster made a brief initial visit to SEEU to assess the initial needs of the campus. A number of graduate students and potential SEEU administrators from Macedonia then began to travel to the IU Bloomington and IUPUI campuses to meet with IU faculty and to attend professional development training. Faculty and staff from IU campuses also traveled to Macedonia to aid in curriculum and resource development, teach courses, and strengthen ties between the two institutions. SEEU implemented modern practices, including credit accumulation and eventual transfer based on the recently introduced European Bologna Accords, interactive teaching methods, and teaching in Albanian, Macedonian, and English languages.

By the late fall of 2001, Foster and four full-time instructors, including IU Bloomington faculty Robert Downey and Gabrielle Goodwin, were permanently on site in Tetovo. Initial coursework was offered in English language, business, computer science communication, pedagogy, and public administration. Subsequent courses in these areas were also offered in the Macedonian and Albanian languages. With assistance from the Zurich-based consultants The May Group, the SEEU campus was quickly constructed from 30 modular buildings, which contained several dozen classrooms, lecture halls, two dorms, a library, and two computer labs. The inaugural SEEU first-year class of the 2001–2002 school year consisted of 910 students, and grew to over 5,000 students in the 2006–2007 academic year. Nearly 80 percent of students enrolled at SEEU were ethnic Albanians, with the remaining student body comprising primarily Macedonians.

The growth in enrollment at SEEU increased the numbers of ethnic Albanians in higher education in Macedonia. On the SEEU campus, Albanian and Macedonian students were able to meet and attend classes together, thus helping to diminish some of the conflicts of 2000 and 2001. SEEU currently has nearly 8,000 students enrolled, and has graduated almost 4,000 students since its opening in October 2001. It has also established a branch campus in Skopje, the capital city of Macedonia, with a Master’s in Information Systems program run by faculty who studied at IU.
By 2006, IU had completed its USAID grant, and SEEU had moved to self-sustained growth. IU has continued this relationship with SEEU by investing and assisting with its endowment. Paul Foster became provost and senior vice president for academic affairs in 2010 and held that position through 2012. President Michael McRobbie traveled to Macedonia in November 2011 to celebrate SEEU’s 10-year anniversary. There, he signed a renewed agreement of friendship and cooperation between IU and SEEU, and received an honorary doctorate. He had previously visited SEEU when it was inaugurated in 2001. IU Vice President for International Affairs David Zaret serves on SEEU’s Executive Board and travels annually to Macedonia for board meetings.

When recently asked about SEEU and IU, Charles Reafsnyder, who directed all of IU’s interactions for the duration of the grant, reflected, “If you take the long view, not every project that IU is involved in is either this intense or this broad, or lasts for this long. Some of our longest, closest relationships abroad started out as this kind of project. It’s a very good relationship.”

Reafsnyder adds, “It seems to me that IU has an obligation to pay back to higher education, promoting and supporting access to good quality higher education wherever we go.”
CHARLES REAFSNYDER

The individual most responsible for IU’s participation in the development of the South East European University in Macedonia was Charles Reafsnyder. Reafsnyder began his 30-year career in IU’s international programs as coordinator of recruitment for IU’s Cooperative Program in Malaysia. He was charged with building a faculty, drawn primarily from Midwestern universities, to teach two years’ worth of IU courses to Malaysian students in Malaysia. That program continued for 10 years, during which time several hundred instructors taught several thousand Malaysian students on a campus of the MARA Institute of Technology in Shah Alam, Malaysia.

Reafsnyder became director of that program, later associate dean, and eventually associate vice president for international research and development. He applied his experience in institution building and educational assistance with direct responsibility for programs in Kyrgyzstan, South Africa, Kazakhstan, Indonesia, Azerbaijan, Angola, and Bosnia. He also became an important resource for other academic units wishing to undertake projects overseas.

His most recent programs include assistance to Indonesia in developing stronger higher education programs in management and administration; to Myanmar as that country improves educational opportunities for a rising generation; and to Liberia as it rebuilds its capacity to train doctors, nurses, and others in the public health field.

Vice President for International Affairs David Zaret presented Reafsnyder with the Distinguished International Service Award in May 2014. Zaret noted Reafsnyder’s “practical diplomacy” and added, “Negotiating the federal bureaucracy and working for consensus among departments and institutions, Charles has done much good in the world.”

Reafsnyder retired in May 2014, but the project in Liberia continues to consume his time as he sees through IU’s commitments there and develops a plan for the future.


Reafsnyder was a Peace Corps volunteer in the Pacific island country now known as Chuuk. He returned there to work on his dissertation and commissioned carver Mikel Martin in Satawan Atoll in 1979 to build this canoe so that he could travel from island to island to complete his research. He had the canoe shipped back to Bloomington and donated it to the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, where it has been featured in an exhibition of the cultures of the Pacific.