Bangladesh was on the radar of IU Kelley School of Business students and faculty last fall, thanks to an extended visit by Dr. Golam Mohammed Chowdhury, who recently completed a three-year term as the director of one of South Asia’s oldest business schools, the Institute of Business Administration, part of the University of Dhaka. Chowdhury met privately with faculty and students. He sat in on courses and taught a few, met with faculty and students from all over campus—all with the goal of bringing the universities in the two countries closer together.

Connection between Bloomington and Dhaka is not a new idea. Chowdhury’s visit was made possible by an effort to honor a friendship that began almost 50 years before. In the mid-1960s, the University of Dhaka undertook a project to build an institute for business administration. It was one of the first of its kind in South Asia, and because there were no models in the region, Dhaka officials found assistance halfway around the world. With the support of the Ford Foundation,
Dhaka sent several faculty members to study at IU, and IU sent a resident advisor and staff to Dhaka. The IU imprint can be seen today. When Bloomington undergraduates take Business K201, they study computers in business. Dhaka students also take K201, and in their course they study computers in business.

IU’s Herman B Wells directed the institution-building efforts of the 1960s. He said of Dhaka, “It is one of my favorite cities, and your university is one of my favorites.” The project established a fast friendship between Wells and the vice chancellor of Dhaka University, Dr. Md Osman Ghani.

Institutional ties were undone by the 1971 war that led to Bangladesh’s independence from West Pakistan. Bangladesh began to partner more closely with India, which was at the time cultivating political ties with the Soviet Union. Still, the personal ties continued. Ghani sent two sons and two grandsons to Indiana University. One of those sons, M. Osman Siddique, MBA’74, served under Bill Clinton as U.S. ambassador to Fiji. The other son, M. Osman Yousuf, MBA’76, began a prominent business career working for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and is now the president and CEO of the SYF Group, which advises and promotes business ventures between Bangladesh and the rest of the world.

As the hundredth anniversary of the birth of his father approached, Yousuf searched for a way to honor him. In consultation with the Kelley School, Yousuf and his wife, Veronique Yousuf, endowed the Herman B Wells–M. O. Ghani Faculty Fellowship, which supports the visit of a professor from the Dhaka Institute of Business Administration for three weeks, every other year, in residence at Kelley. “As a sponsor of this fellowship, I not only wanted to honor the pivotal role played by Indiana University School of Business toward the establishment of the Institute of Business Administration in 1966 at Dhaka University, but also to recognize and celebrate the contributions and personal friendship of Chancellor Wells and Vice Chancellor M. O. Ghani,” said Yousuf.
Chowdhury, the first Wells-Ghani fellow, lived during his stay in a suite at the Foster International Living-Learning Center. “Suddenly, I feel like a student. In Dhaka, everybody knows me as Professor Chowdhury. Here, I’m cool. I was regretting that I couldn’t be young again and join the crowd. Students are very welcoming. They go out of their way to say hello.” When faced with doing his laundry (for the first time in very many years), Chowdhury did not find much help in the usual places, but a student saw his predicament, led him through the process, and even lent him the ready cash that the machines needed. “People in Bloomington are like people in Dhaka. We are very informal. Very casual. Here I find people warm and hospitable. Our students would be very comfortable in this atmosphere.”

The University of Dhaka attracts top undergraduates from a country of more than 150 million people. “They would have no trouble academically here, though they would have to adjust to a greater variety of teaching methods. Most classes at the institute are taught with traditional methods. Classes are more interactive and more online here. Of course, our students are up to date with this; it’s our faculty who face the biggest adjustment.”

It is equally true in Indiana as it is in Bangladesh that education is key to a life of successful service for individuals and for building prosperous economies. I am pleased to see the spirit of education and partnership inspired by Herman Wells and Dr. Ghani being continued today. —Former Senator Richard Lugar
Chowdhury feels that Bangladesh offers a social and economic background “very conducive to global relationships. Bangladesh is the only country in that region that has excellent relationships with all its neighbors, and it's strategically located between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Bangladesh is a modern Muslim majority country, open to other cultures and religions.” He offers a complex explanation from the country’s unusual history. Although the genocide of 1971 remains vivid in memories (Chowdhury himself lost two brothers in that war), the people of Bangladesh associate it with a military junta and not the majority of Pakistanis. Bangladesh and India share a Bengali culture that spans the border between the two countries. “Even our national anthem was written by an Indian.”

Part of the fellowship requirement is that the recipient report to students in Dhaka about his or her experience at IU. “They need to know about the programs and standing. They can find out from the Internet, but hearing it from the horse’s mouth is different,” Chowdhury said. Yousuf added, “The visiting fellow is also required to provide a seminar, open to senior faculty members from all reputable business schools in Bangladesh, to share experiences and lessons learned at the Kelley School and focus on modern business school pedagogy.”