IU’s School of Education Forms Linkage with Russian Institution

As a result of a $260,000 grant from the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), Indiana University’s School of Education in Bloomington and Ryazan State Pedagogical University (RSPU) in Russia are engaged in a two-year long exchange effort to internationalize programs in education at both institutions. The first contingent of five educators and administrators from Ryazan, a city about 120 miles from Moscow, spent several weeks in November and December visiting IU to learn as much as they could about higher education in the U.S. and how a large state university functions. “We imagine ourselves as ‘freshmen’ going through all stages of the learning process, from admission to graduation,” said Nina Ivanovna Demidova, Deputy Rector of Education at Ryazan State. The other members of the group were Marina Vasylyevna Kaza-kova, Professor of Botany and department chair, Victor Aleksandrovich Kruchkov, assistant professor of English and senior instructor of In-service Teacher Training, Natalia Alexeevna Siomkina, assistant professor and senior instructor of English as a Foreign Language, and Nikolai Ivanovich Yermakov, Dean of Physics and Mathematics.

Ryazan State’s partnership with IU should place it in a strategic position in the educational reform movement going on in Russia, according to Howard Mehlinger, Director for IU’s Center for Excellence in Education and project director. IU’s participation in the linkage strengthens the missions of the School’s Center for the Study of Russian Education, co-directed by Mehlinger and Ben Eklof, as well as the College of Arts and Sciences’ Russian and East European Institute, directed by Owen Johnson.

With a current enrollment of 6,000, Ryazan State—a teachers’ college with strong collaborative ties to the secondary schools of the region—is itself in the process of evolving into a comprehensive university. During part of their stay, the delegation was able to visit a few Indiana primary and secondary schools in Monroe County, as well as Valparaiso University, the College Board offices in Evanston, and the Ivy Tech Institute in Indianapolis.

For its part, Indiana University is committed to assisting RSPU in several areas, including globalizing the curriculum, examining higher education administration approaches, improving library services, and considering the role of distance education at RSPU. Over the next two years, IU faculty to visit Ryazan State will include James Neal, Dean of University Libraries, Howard Mehlinger, and Don Hossler, chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, plus other IU faculty and administrators. Currently, an education doctoral student, James Dorsett, is in Ryazan for the academic year to conduct dissertation research.

Mehlinger foresees a complex transitional process in Russia’s efforts at educational reform. In the area of multiculturalism, Russia must incorporate fifty-three different languages and more than a hundred ethnic groups into its society. “The issue is how to deal with creating the melting pot and yet recognize different ethnic groups,” he says. “It’s an overwhelming problem there, and here, and I think we have a lot to learn from how they handle that.”

In the coming months, more staff will be arriving from RSPU. During April and May, Hossler will be visiting Ryazan. Those involved at both institutions believe this project will be the start of a long collaborative relationship between the two universities.