Enterprising Kelley School of Business Students Inaugurate International Course

That is what is so great about the Kelley culture," says Christina Frank, enthusiastic about the whirlwind fieldtrip to Brazil that she and her fellow students took over spring break. "If the students come up with an idea to develop a new program to meet their interests, the administration will take it seriously and support it as best as they can." The entirely new student-designed and student-driven program, called "Kelley International Perspectives" (KIP), took 50 first- and second-year M.B.A. students abroad—29 to Brazil and 21 to Japan—for 10 days. A Kelley School of Business faculty member accompanied each group.

KIP grew out of conversations in October 1998 between a nucleus of four first-year M.B.A. students: Erin Fish, Elizabeth Foster, Catherine Sorce, and Frank. They realized that while the school had a rich selection of internationally focused courses, including M.B.A. coursework offered overseas, there was no access to hands-on experience of a foreign business environment. And, given their already heavy course loads, they wanted a program that would not take them for a long stay away from the campus. After canvassing their fellow students and discovering enthusiasm for the idea of an overseas program during spring break, the students began to organize a proposal to present to the school. The proposal's general features were modeled after Kellogg's Global Initiatives in Management (GIM) program at Northwestern University, which combines classroom instruction on selected countries with short visits to those countries to meet with industry leaders and conduct research for the final class projects.

After Kelley administrators indicated their interest and support, the student leaders met regularly throughout the year and the summer of 1999, working out the myriad details involved in developing a new course that would involve visits to two very different countries and business environments. They met regularly with faculty and administrators such as Dan Smith, chair of the M.B.A. Program; finance professor William Sartoris; Terrill Cosgray, director of the M.B.A. program; Christine Davis, assistant director of Graduate Student Services; and Louise Siffin, director of Global Project Development. Their proposal had to be approved by five different levels of the school and the university.

The KIP program is student-run and managed, with faculty and administrators serving as advisors and facilitators. The students make all the decisions, choosing which countries to study and visit, on which country-specific business research topics to focus, and which corporations and businesses to contact for site visits. They design the syllabus, select the materials for the reading packets, invite expert speakers, and recruit students for the program. In addition, they also have to learn about the more mundane, though essential matters, such
as budgeting, logistics, and tourist visas. Ten student leaders share the responsibilities, five for each group. Frank was the group leader for Brazil, which included Fish, Foster, Sorce, and Lisa Boyd. Chandra Wiggs headed the Japan group, which included Thad Ewald, Eric Fasser, Megan Hotopp, and James Hudak.

For eight weeks starting in January, the KIP students took a supplemental, weekly three-hour class to learn as much as possible about the political, cultural, and business climates of their two countries. Their faculty advisors, who attended all the classes and accompanied them on the fieldtrips, were Harvey Hegarty, chair of Management, for Brazil, and Marc Dollinger, chair of the Undergraduate Program, for Japan. The students invited a range of IU faculty and scholars from units such as anthropology, East Asian Studies Center, Latin American and Caribbean Studies Center, and the School of Public and Environmental Affairs to give background presentations. They also heard from local business leaders with global business connections in these countries. They drew on the many Brazilian and Japanese international students at Kelley to help with cultural and elementary language lessons. The Brazil group was particularly fortunate to have Liliana Guimaeres, a visiting Brazilian scholar in entrepreneurship who gave them first-hand advice and contacts.

As for research topics, the Brazil group concentrated on such aspects of the economy as capital markets, financing, entrepreneurship, human resources, and investment relations, and therefore visited banks, investment companies, small business associations, as well as multinational corporations such as Cummins Engine, General Motors, and Proctor & Gamble. The Japan group was interested in manufacturing and the auto industry, high technology and dot.com companies, and sports industries, so they visited such companies as Toyota and Nissan, Xybernaut and Horizon Digital Enterprise, and the NFL and NBA Japan headquarters.

Some visits were done with the entire group, such as those to the American Chambers of Commerce and the stock exchanges of each country, while others were the responsibility of smaller focus groups. The students were often pleasantly surprised to be recognized as “the Kelley M.B.A.’s,” delighted that the school’s reputation had preceded them and happy to have been greeted warmly by IU alumni at some of the sites. But they were most impressed when, at several sites, they were greeted by directors at the highest level who treated them with the utmost hospitality. Of course, the spring break program was not devoted entirely to business.

The Brazil group’s visit just happened to coincide with Sambadromo, an annual competition of samba dancing on floats in Rio de Janeiro, and the group in Japan was able to tour several major cities and do some shopping.

For next year, student leaders have already been chosen and decisions made that KIP will go to South Africa and Japan, and possibly again to Brazil. To help defray some of the program’s expenses, borne largely this year by the students themselves with additional support from IUB’s Center for International Business Education and Research, they have already begun to campaign for some corporate sponsorship for KIP.

Speaking of the experience, Frank marvels at how the program “exceeded our every expectation; it was so much better than what we had ever hoped for, given this first attempt.” Their success does not surprise Cosgray, who praises Kelley’s M.B.A. students as not only highly motivated people, but enthusiastic and outward-looking, interested in the lives and cultures of other countries. As for the school’s willingness to consider and support a new program like KIP, he says, “We consider our M.B.A. students our partners in the process of designing and recreating existing programs. This really fell into ‘business as usual.”

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