IUB Professor Helps Build Teacher Education Program in Macedonia

Background: In 2001, the new multilingual South East European University (SEEU) in Tetovo, Macedonia, was established to provide minority ethnic Albanians fairer access to higher education, the result of a unique international collaboration (see International News, April 2002). Faculty and administrators from Indiana University and member institutions of the Indiana Consortium for International Programs are offering SEEU assistance in faculty and curriculum development, academic and instructional skills training, administrative support, and library development. Below is a piece written in the summer of 2003 by IU Bloomington professor of education Terrence Mason, who spent the months of May and June 2002 teaching at SEEU.

Although my work at SEEU has been to advise their Teacher Training Department on curriculum development and teaching methods, the political context in which the university exists has, from the beginning, exerted a powerful influence on my activities there. Not surprisingly, given the recent history of the Balkan region, politics affect almost everything. As the journal entry below suggests, the impact of the tense political situation is felt everywhere. The establishment of SEEU itself, which has occurred with considerable support from Indiana University, represents a significant achievement in negotiating the complex, delicate, and occasionally volatile interplay of politics, language, history, and culture.

In order to appreciate how these forces affect so many aspects of contemporary life in Macedonia, including education, one must look to the country’s recent past. The political and cultural conflict prompted by the dissolution of Yugoslavia spread to the Republic of Macedonia in 2001 as tensions between the ethnic Macedonian majority and the ethnic Albanian minority erupted into violence. Fortunately, through the efforts of the international community, a large-scale war was averted. The antecedents of this conflict, however, are rooted in long-standing cultural and ethnic tensions that are now, in the wake of the recent violence, being addressed.

The role of education figures prominently among the issues that have contributed to the conflict. Macedonia’s ethnic Albanian community, which represents approximately 23 percent of the total population, has historically been denied the opportunity to pursue higher education in its native language and has received insufficient preparation in the Macedonian language in primary and secondary schools to succeed in the Macedonian language universities. Hence, resolution of the political conflict within the country must address the issues of Albanian language and access to higher education. SEEU was founded with this purpose in mind.

Through generous support from USAID, the European Community, the Soros Foundation, and other sources, SEEU began offering classes in the fall of 2001. By its second year of operation, it was offering courses to more than 2,000 students in the fields of legal studies, public administration, communication sciences and technologies, business administration, and teacher training. The curriculum is taught in three languages (Albanian, Macedonian, and English), thus creating a multilingual institution to provide high-quality education for the citizens of the Republic of Macedonia and to prepare students with the skills and knowledge.

Yesterday the chair of the Teacher Training Department announced the formation of a new political party, the Democratic Union for Integration, for which she will serve as a prominent spokesperson. This morning, as two of my colleagues picked me up at my apartment in Skopje to drive to the university in Tetovo, I was surprised to see her seated in the backseat of the car.

As I climbed in beside her, they explained that she was accompanying us because, given her new political role, it would be better for her to ride with colleagues. Although the armed conflict in Macedonia had ended more than a year earlier, and calm had begun to prevail again in this part of the southern Balkans, the possibility of violence still existed. Driving the 30 kilometer trip through the mountains to the university, we arrived safely without incident.

—Journal entry, June 8, 2002
needed to participate actively in the political, cultural, and economic life of the region. The university also offers the opportunity for linguistic, cultural, and ethnic differences to be explored in a diverse and open setting. As such, it has the potential of serving as an important catalyst for the advancement of a society in which cultural diversity; social, political, and economic justice; and democratic values are promoted.

Since March 2001, I have visited Macedonia three times in conjunction with the IU/Macedonia linkage grant that IU received from USAID to serve as partner institution with SEEU. As one of several IU faculty members from various departments and campuses of the IU system participating in the project, I have conducted faculty workshops on issues of curriculum development and teaching and of assessment methodology and have served as a consultant for the development of their teacher preparation programs. In addition, I have participated in teaching a course on multicultural issues in education and collected data for a study of student perceptions of the role of SEEU in resolving the current cultural, political, and social problems facing Macedonia.

In the fall of 2002, I was invited to present the results of this study at a research symposium in Thessaloniki, Greece, sponsored by the Institute of International Education entitled Challenges in Internationalizing Higher Education in Southeastern Europe: Policy and Practice. My work at SEEU has provided me with valuable perspectives on many of the educational problems we face in the United States. Educators in Macedonia face the challenges of creating a new society in the post-Yugoslavian era, and their schools are striving to address issues of equity, cultural and religious pluralism, and social justice. In the United States, these issues constitute major themes as we, too, seek to foster intercultural understanding in our schools.

While the purpose of my participation in this project has been to assist my colleagues at SEEU in preparing teachers for a rapidly changing Macedonian society, the benefits have been reciprocal. The insights that I have gained from learning about how politics, culture, and education influence one another in contemporary Macedonia have provided new understandings that I regularly share with the students in my classes here at IU. The value of this work was reaffirmed for me recently when I was contacted by one of my former students who told me that she had decided to join the Peace Corps and that my work in Macedonia was a major influence in her decision. Such unintended consequences only strengthen my commitment to continue working on projects such as this one.