IUK Labor Studies Sponsors Overseas Study Trip to Brazil

Seven Indiana University Kokomo students spent spring break 2005 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, as part of an overseas study program sponsored by the Division of Labor Studies. The IUK contingent visited auto and steel plants near Porto Alegre; met union workers and leaders there; and studied the Brazilian labor movement, its organizational history and structure, and the history of the Workers Party. IUK professor of labor studies William Mello and his counterpart at IU Northwest, Ruth Needleman, led the trip. Both had visited Brazil in summer of 2004 as special guests of the Brazilian Federation of Labor at the World Forum on Education.

When the trip was first announced in early fall “just by word of mouth,” student response was overwhelming, said Mello. Students participating in the trip were Tamara Biddler, Wayne Conwell, Kim Ford, Sue Ann Henson, Amber Jordan, Todd Jordan, and Susan Perry, all of whom also hold jobs in Kokomo’s auto and electronics industries. Mello said that the spring exchange was “a great way to show our students that the U.S. trade union model is not the only model to consider. . . . They can decide for themselves how to extract what’s good and useful from other unions’ practices and appreciate how the Brazilians expanded their unions’ credibility as a social force when they expanded the realm of their labor activities.”

Although U.S. labor unions enjoy benefits unknown in Brazil—such as employers who pay some education expenses for workers—the political power of U.S. unions has diminished in recent decades. Brazilian unions, in contrast, wield tremendous political power and even the president of the country was a former trade union president. This political prestige grows out of popular appreciation for the unions’ support of nationwide social programs. Promoting literacy, small business opportunities, and job retraining, the social programs help Brazil’s unemployed, who might have been, or who someday might become, union members.

The son of Brazilian immigrants to the United States, Mello spent several years working as a national trade union representative in both countries, before entering labor education full time. The idea of the trip started at an IU Northwest conference that examined different forms of adult and labor education. A conference speaker from the central trade unions of Brazil invited Mello and Needleman to address an international education forum in his country last summer.

Mello and Needleman carefully chose the site because of the region’s similarities to Indiana. “We wanted to look at a place that resembles the context in which our students live, so they can draw on familiar experiences,” Mello said. As in Indiana, the economy of Porto Alegre relies on both agriculture and manufacturing, with recent additions of high tech and computer businesses. Corn and soybeans are grown in the region, and its population is racially mixed because of high emigration from Europe.

Mello wants to arrange future study exchanges in other countries, with at least one trip per semester. He is hoping to invite a faculty member from Brazil’s federal University of Ceara to visit and teach labor studies at IU campuses in 2005–2006.

Indiana University’s Division of Labor Studies is unique in the way it mixes social sciences and liberal studies with practical knowledge of union and labor practices. University programs that focus only on the present-day mechanics of union leadership may question why their students need broader university education. “Why study union labor history?” Mello asks rhetorically.

continued on page 42
Memorial Scholarship Fund  
Is Created for IUB Spanish Major

The Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Indiana University Bloomington is helping to raise funds for a scholarship to honor the memory of a junior majoring in Spanish who was tragically killed in a car accident in April 2005. The Ashley Crouse Memorial Scholarship is the result of a spontaneous outpouring of sympathy and generosity from fellow students who knew Crouse, an active and popular student and community leader, widely admired on campus for her kindness and compassion for others. Crouse was also a double major in political science and enrolled in the Liberal Arts and Management Program (LAMP). A native of Indiana, Crouse participated as a high school student in IU's Honors Program in Foreign Languages for High School Students and studied in Spain.

Depending on fundraising efforts, the department hopes to offer a $500 scholarship award in spring 2006 to students of Spanish, says Kimberly Geeslin, a Spanish professor who had Crouse as a student in her Introduction to Hispanic Linguistics class. “The project was created by the class ... by students coming together. She meant a lot to a lot of people. Our hope is that it will embody the spirit of Ashley's energy and involvement.”

Those interested in contributing to the scholarship fund should contact Jane Drake, Department of Spanish and Portuguese; e-mail: jmdrake@indiana.edu.

Last summer, Ashley Crouse (third from left) participated in IU's study abroad program in Cuernavaca, Mexico.

—RMN

Labor Studies continued from page 25

“To understand the structure of unions and how that affects what’s done today. Similarly, we study economics to understand its impact on wage increases.”

Purely academic studies of labor without the functional education tend to “remove the university life from the community life,” he added.

“What we say in IU Labor Studies is that the university has to become even more involved in the community where it’s located. We need to respond to situations of work where people spend so much of their time.”

—IU Kokomo  
Office of Communication and Marketing