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Overseas Exchange Opens Doors for MBA Students

Mary G. Trefry, Sacred Heart University

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From left, Fred Scholtus, John Sayour, and Helio D'Andrade pose for a photo in front of the European Investment Bank.

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Sacred Heart University students in both the United States and Luxembourg have had an opportunity this year to expand their learning experience by visiting with their colleagues on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

Back in March, five local MBA students and one spouse headed to Luxembourg to participate in a program there with 10 of their Luxembourg counterparts. The experience included an in-class course on cross-cultural management at night and lots of traveling during the day. Among the places the students visited were the European Investment Bank; the European Court of Justice; and ArcelorMittal, which is the world’s largest steel company. “The company was formed as part of a controversial merger. The tour was arranged by a SHU alumnus and current student, and the group had a chance to hear from the plant director,” said Dr. Mary Trefry, associate professor in the Welch MBA program. The students also heard from the director of Corporate Social Responsibility at the European Investment Bank who talked about lending money to countries to support their development projects, she added.

The trip also included several social events, such as sightseeing and a walking tour of historic Luxembourg, to allow the students to get to know each other, and Trefry suspects that lifelong friendships were made. “For some reason, this group bonded across cultures in a way I’ve never seen before,” she said.

The students’ classwork gave them the opportunity to explore how cultural differences affect them as individuals and as business leaders, how to communicate across cultures and the implications for management. “The best practices in the United States may or may not work in other cultures. A willingness to adapt is critical,” Trefry pointed out.
“I want to thank everyone again for the wonderful two weeks that were given to us. This trip went way beyond my wildest expectations. The way we all melded together was amazing. I know for a fact that I have made friends for life and each and every one will always be in my heart. Their sense of humor, easygoing natures, hospitality and silliness made this trip absolutely amazing for me and my counterparts,” said Stamford resident Olga Pinsky, who is originally from Belarus, USSR. “I would recommend that anyone within the MBA program go on this trip. It’s an unbelievable experience. We got to visit ArcelorMittal in France, a metal plant where we were taken through the whole process of making massive pieces of metal. We learned that a lot of the buildings in New York City were built with metal from this plant – the biggest one being the very first beam put into the Freedom Tower at Ground Zero. We also visited the European Court of Justice and got to sit in the courtroom during an actual case that the EU was trying. Lastly, we went to the European Investment Bank and spoke with a VP about how the EIB finances the 27 member states. I know for a fact that without this trip, I wouldn't have seen any of this or known a lot of this information.”

Adds Frederic Scholtus of Luxembourg, “From the most fundamental theories on cross-cultural management to case studies and practice, this class offered the US- and Luxembourg-based students (Melted Team) an exciting learning environment. On top of that, our corporate and cultural visits allowed us to observe more realities of the “Grande-Région – living steel technology with smelting steel beams rolling under our feet at ArcelorMittal, learning finance and corporate social responsibility at the European Investment Bank or laws at the European Court of Justice, including some time of reflection inside the Metz’ Cathedral and the discovery of Craftmen’s creativity highlighted by a sunbeam through stained glass windows. All were invitations to share views, experience and ideas, which contributed so largely to this unique cross-cultural class. Thank you so much to all for making this wonderful adventure happen, and especially to our professor.”

Next month, 11 MBA students and two spouses will make their way from Luxembourg to Connecticut for a similar two-week experience here, said Trefry, who will host a barbecue at her home to kick off the program. The course, entitled “Contemporary Issues in Global Management,” with a theme of “Connections: Opportunities and Challenges,” will enable the group to explore multiple kinds of technology-enabled connections, Trefry said. “They will discover how we are all interconnected throughout the world in every aspect of life and will learn how new technology, such as Facebook and Twitter, impact geopolitics and business. They will also discuss economic interdependency and financial contagion, how the economic crisis here in
2008 affected economics around the world and how the European euro crisis is doing the same now."

While here, the students will visit Sikorsky Aircraft where they will meet with the chief counsel and tour the assembly plant. They will also visit General Electric and the IBM Research Center, Trefry said. In addition, they will go sightseeing in New York City and participate in several other social events.

Trefry noted that the students who participated in the March trip ranged in age from mid-20s to 70, and many of them were not originally born in the United States. "It underscores the global community of our world these days. People are born in one place and work and live in another," she said. "We try to encourage all our business students to go abroad at some point. It’s important for them to recognize the impact of cultural differences and that people who are socialized differently will think differently. Students who have participated in these programs have described it as mind-changing. You learn to look at things differently when you see them through the eyes of someone from another culture."