DISTANCE LEARNING: ROTARY’S GROUP STUDY EXCHANGE PROGRAM

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Abstract -- The term Distance Learning takes on a whole new meaning for educators when they actually get to travel international to study. The Group Study Exchange Program of the Rotary Foundation of Rotary International is a unique cultural and vocational exchange opportunity for young professionals between the ages of 25 and 40. The program provides travel grants for teams of participants to exchange visits between paired areas in different countries. For four to six weeks, team members study the host country’s institutions and ways of life, observe their own vocations as practiced abroad, develop personal and professional relationships, and exchange ideas. The presenter was selected to participate as a member of Rotary International’s Group Study Exchange Program, traveling to Argentina for the month of April 2001. This paper will present the necessary details for participating in this program as well as his personal experiences of his trip.

The field of Engineering and Technology is constantly being expanded in a world of global competition. The use of technology in teaching is increasingly being adopted by educational institutions despite some evidence that the effort has not been as great as was often predicted [1]. As technical educators, we are challenged to keep our students informed of technological advances around the world. We are also challenged to find funding sources that grant us the opportunity to study abroad.

Distance learning is a popular technology that has been able to assist teachers as learners to accomplish this goal. The two main objectives of distance learning are: (a) providing equitable access to quality education and (b) meeting the unique learning needs and styles of individuals [2]. While these objectives of distance learning are widely accepted by faculty, the pedagogy of teaching via distance learning may not be. Therefore, the shortcoming of distance learning does not lie in its effectiveness, but in the faculty’s willingness to embrace it or use it [3].

An alternative solution that meets this challenge is possible when the term “distance learning” is redefined from its association with electronic technology. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the following terms: Distance - an extent of area along a route measured linearly, and Learning - to gain knowledge by study, instruction, or experience. These terms combined in their literal meanings describe Rotary International’s Group Study Exchange Program. This outstanding opportunity for professionals to study abroad is possible through The Rotary Foundation of Rotary International.

The author was selected to participate as a member of Rotary International’s Group Study Exchange (GSE) Program for the Southern Illinois District, traveling to Argentina for the month of April 2001. This paper will review the details of this excellent travel and exchange opportunity for non-Rotarians to study abroad and learn from their international counterparts. The following major points of the GSE Program as well as some of his personal experiences will be covered in this report:

- **Major Points:**
  - Program description
  - Benefits
  - Eligibility
  - Obligations
  - Application
  - Testimonial

**Program Description**

The Group Study Exchange (GSE) program is a unique cultural and vocational exchange opportunity for young business and professional men and women in their initial years of professional life. The program is designed to develop professional and leadership skills among young people to better prepare them to address the needs of their communities and an increasingly global workplace [4].

The program provides travel grants for teams of participants to exchange visits between paired areas in different countries. For four to six weeks, team members study the host country’s institutions and ways of life, observe their own vocations as practiced abroad, develop personal and professional relationships, and exchange ideas [5]. The Rotary Foundation provides a round-trip air ticket, and local Rotarians in the host country provide meals, lodging, and group travel in their district. Team members pay for personal and incidental expenses.

**The Rigorous Nature of GSE**

The Group Study Exchange program is not a vacation. During this relatively short period of time, participants should anticipate an agenda that demands both physical and mental stamina. Besides the time spent traveling, presenting, viewing and studying, they should also anticipate that their time commitments will continue after the tour. The average GSE team member makes eight presentations to Rotary clubs or other organizations following the team’s

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tour. Therefore, before they depart, they seriously need to consider the rigorous nature of the trip and their ability to complete their responsibility successfully.

**A Typical Four-Week GSE Tour**

Vocational
- **Vocational visits** = a minimum of five full days

Fellowship
- **Club presentations** = 10-15
- **Club visits, Social events** = 2-3 formal events per week
- **District conference** = 2-3 days

Cultural
- **Cultural and site tours** = 3-4 hours per day
- **Interaction time with host families** = 3-4 hours per day

**Benefits**

Since 1965, the GSE program has provided inspiring vocational, educational, and cultural experiences for more than 32,000 men and women. Group Study Exchange participants follow an extensive and rigorous program of international travel and participatory activities involving vocational, cultural, and fellowship activities.

Vocational Activities provide opportunities to observe vocations as practiced in another country, while impacting their long-term careers through participation in an organized program of study, discussion, and vocational visits, thereby allowing for a reciprocal exchange of ideas in their respective fields, which ultimately will benefit all communities involved [4]. Cultural experiences allow participants to study another country, its people and institutions through experiences in an organized and meaningful host program, and to promote an appreciation of cultural diversity worldwide [4]. Fellowship opportunities encourage team members and hosts to meet, communicate, and live with each other in a spirit of fellowship and goodwill; to consider each other’s problems, aspirations, and community concerns’, and to foster lasting friendships and international understanding [4].

**Focused GSEs**

Recently, districts have been exploring innovative ideas to expand the scope and focus of GSE. Recognizing the benefits of these ideas, The Rotary Foundation Trustees recently adopted several program changes that allow districts more creativity and flexibility when planning an exchange. The following new categories of GSEs present exciting possibilities.

**Single-Vocation GSEs**

Teams composed of participants in one specialized vocation have a unique opportunity to enrich the communities they visit, as well as to expand their professional horizons. Single-vocation teams can be organized for professional information sharing (e.g., teams of physicians, educators, agriculturists, engineers, etc.).

**Cultural GSEs**

The purpose of a cultural exchange is for artists, writers, musicians, linguists, or museum curators to share their talents and interests through a GSE that focuses on the more creative aspects of an area. Vocational days may be spent observing yoga classes in India, learning to dance the tango in Argentina, or conducting a New York Philharmonic rehearsal session [4].

**Neighboring Country GSEs**

Whether they have had centuries-long conflicts or mutual friendships, countries which border each other have always presented an opportunity for exchange. A three-year pilot program was established in 1997-98 to enable districts to explore exchanges with their neighbors. A Neighboring Country GSE is defined as an exchange between any two districts located in countries that have a common border or exist in close proximity [4]. In multi-country districts, a Neighboring Country GSE must be based on travel between localities that have a common country border or exist in close proximity.

**GSEs in Non-Rotary Countries**

Because Rotary is a foreign concept in these areas, a GSE is often of interest to the media and the community. The media is often interested in things that are new or “firsts”. Exchanges usually occur between teams from Rotary countries [4]. In recent years there have been several exchanges into non-Rotary countries, such as the People’s Republic of China. A GSE is often a precursor to Rotary expansion into a new area.

**Eligibility**

A GSE team consists of four non-Rotarian business or professional people and a Rotarian team leader. Candidates for team membership must be currently employed in any recognized business or profession on a full-time basis and are 25-40 years of age in order to have the maximum long-term impact on his/her career development [5]. To fulfill the rigorous and / or extensive demands of international travel and active participation in multi-week activities, candidates must also be [4]:

- Certified to be in good health.
Interested in and clearly enthusiastic about their chosen vocations, and possess outstanding vocational skills.

- A resident in or employed in the sending Rotary district.
- A citizen of the country in which they reside.
- Proficiency in the language of the country being visited.
- Neat in appearance and show the ability to express themselves clearly and logically.
- Personable, articulate, cooperative, exemplary in their work, and enthusiastic about their vocations.
- Driven to seek the maximum educational value from the program as well as able to fulfill the rigorous demands of international travel and active participation in an extensive itinerary.

Applicants will be considered ineligible if they meet any of the following conditions [4]:

- A Rotarian or honorary Rotarian.
- A member of a provisional Rotary club, and employee of a Rotary club, district, or other Rotary entity or of Rotary International.
- Any Rotarian’s (or honorary Rotarian’s) or Rotary employee’s spouse, ancestor (parent or grandparent by blood), or lineal descendant (child or grandchild by blood and any legally adopted child) or a spouse of a lineal descendant
- The spouse of another team member.
- A former Rotarian (or honorary Rotarian) or Rotarian’s spouse, ancestor (parent or grandparent by blood) or lineal descendant who resigned for the express purpose of becoming a team member. A former Rotarian must have been resigned from Rotary at least three years at the time of application for him/her or any of the above-mentioned persons to be eligible for team membership.

**Obligations**

The amount of effort and coordination to sponsor a GSE is incredible. Two countries having to select their five participants from tens of clubs, create an itinerary for the visiting team according to their professional interests, and then arrange for tens of host families to provide meals, lodging and transportation for a month. With such an effort required by the Rotarians, the participants could certainly expect to fulfill certain obligations that will guarantee a successful exchange for all parties involved.

**Pre-Tour Obligations [4]**

- Complete the Biographical Data Form and submit it to the GSE chairperson at least three months prior to departure.
- Complete the Certification of Insurance and Medical Certificate.
- Attend a minimum of 12 hours of predeparture orientation.

- Take the necessary advance steps to receive language instruction as least three months prior to departure if the person doesn’t speak the host country’s language with some fluency.
- Review the program itinerary and provide feedback to the team leader to ensure that vocational goals will be met.

**Post-Tour Obligations [4]**

- Submit the GSE Exchange Evaluation Form to The Rotary Foundation within two weeks of the return and send a copy to the GSE chairperson.
- Submit the 1-2 page GSE final report to the GSE chairperson within two months of returning.
- Accept speaking engagements, when invited, at a minimum of five Rotary clubs, or other appropriate organizations such as primary and secondary schools and Rotary district conferences.

**Application**

The process of applying for a GSE begins with finding out if the Rotary District in which the applicant lives has decided to participate in the GSE program during the coming program year. If the district has decided to participate, they are considering one of three options. First, they have already agreed with another district to complete an exchange. Second, are prepared to allow the Foundation Trustees to determine the pairing. Third, is considering one of the focused Group Study Exchanges such as Single Vocation GSE, Cultural GSE, and Neighboring Country GSE. Whichever situation, a GSE District Application (167-EN) must be received (not postmarked) no later than 1 November of each Rotary year [4].

Once the applicant has identified their district as a participant, the next step is to attain a GSE Team Member Application (161-EN) from a Rotarian. Referrals are usually the best source for attaining an application, since it is also necessary to have the signature of a sponsoring Rotarian before submitting an application. The application form requires all the standard information and the completion of a one-page essay on what he or she wishes to gain from the GSE.

The final step in the selection process is a formal interview by the GSE subcommittee. During the interview the committee members will verify the candidate’s age qualifications, review their essay, letters of recommendation, their intent to stay in their occupation, and their proficiency to speak the language of the host country.

**Testimonial**

The Southern Illinois GSE to Argentina took place between March 30 and April 30, 2001. During that time we visited
the cities, clubs, and countryside of Pinamar, Mar del Ajo, Mar del Plata, and Miramar on the seacoast, and Delores, Tandil, Olavarria, Azul, and Bolivar in the pampas. The pampas is located in the south central area of the country and is known as the land of the Gaucho.

In this brief testimonial I would like to highlight the activities that made this such a successful trip.

Vocational

As a Tenure-Track Assistant Professor in engineering/technology, the vocational aspect of the GSE was especially fulfilling for me. This trip has greatly enriched my professional development and knowledge of Argentina’s manufacturing and university system.

As a result of this trip I have been able to complete 8 credit hours of Professional Internship towards the completion of my Ph.D. Additionally, I have had conference proposals accepted by the International Conference for Engineering Education and the National Association for Industrial Technologists. I fully anticipate publishing papers in the conference proceedings about this experience and Rotary’s GSE as well. Perhaps the most important part of my vocational visits was the professional contacts that I established. These contacts with Argentinean industries and professors will allow me to begin working collaboratively on global manufacturing research projects.

Visiting the 15 manufacturers and four universities gave me an insight to their industrial and education systems that would have been hard to achieve, even here in the United States. The list of industries varied from coffee to cement and textile to tile. The owners of all these companies put quality above all else and insisted on staying on the leading edge of technology to maintain their competitive advantage. The companies were increasingly adopting more automation, despite the relatively low cost of labor, and seeking a global market. It would be easy to write a page on each of these companies describing their strategic plan and level of technology.

The following is a partial list of the Professional visits I made:

**Companies**

1. Hilamar S.A. Hilados – Textile Manufacturer. Forty year old company that started with a manual machine in the owner’s garage. Today people say that he isn’t in the textile business, he is the textile business.

2. Mario Sergio – Sweater Manufacturer. Subsidiary to Hilamar that receives all their yarn at cost and only sells their sweaters in their own stores. Sweaters are all sewn on Computer Numerical Controlled Machines in Japan.

3. Bordatex – Clothing Label Manufacturer. Supplies the labels to over 33 sweater manufacturers in the Mar del Plata region.

4. Fundacion UCIP - Mar del Plata Management Consulting Group. Works closely with the municipality to create better quality companies that will attract more companies.

5. Cabrales Coffee Company - Second largest coffee company in Argentina. The owner showed us that 1-% of the weight of the coffee beans from its suppliers is metal, primarily in the form of buckshot and slugs from the trucks being shot at.

6. Centauro – Fish Packing Company. The Argentine navy protects its international fishing boundaries from the threat of 300 Japanese fishing ships that sit just outside of the boundary and use huge lights to lure the fish.


8. Citroncello Liquor Manufacturer. Manufactures lemon-citrus specialty liquor. The government collects its alcohol tax from the manufacturer before the product is sold.


10. Sata Automotive Parts Company – Italian owned company. Produces automotive parts for Brazilian assembly plants. Considers its two competitive advantages to be the higher education level of its people and reinvesting 19% of its profits into new technology.

11. Cagnoli Meats – Third generation of owners. The value of its meats actually increases during the 45 day curing process.

12. San Lorenzo Ceramic Tile Company – Produces high quality ceramic tiles by using state of the art machines made from all over the world.


14. Explosivos Tecnologicos Argentinos – Produces specialty directional charges for the oil industry. Directional plasma charge has been able to penetrate any material the military has tried.

15. Cemento San Martin - Cement Factory. The employment at old factory peaked at 750 workers and required a small city be built next to the factory. The new factory will double the production of the old and employ only 40 technicians.

The country’s oldest and largest industry is the processing and packaging of food products. The textile industry ranks second. Other major industries produce rubber goods (both natural and synthetic), cement, chemicals, paper, plastic, and petroleum products.

Argentina is one of the leading manufacturing countries of Latin America with most of its industry centered in Buenos Aires. It has been following a trend of breaking
away from dependence on food processing and consumer goods and placing greater emphasis on heavy industry. Manufacturing establishments employ about 20 percent of the national labor force. Other manufactures include textiles, metal goods (excluding machinery), chemicals, drugs, vehicles and machinery, wood and lumber, clay, glass, and stone products.

**Education**

At 95%, Argentina has one of the highest literacy rates in South America. Public schools were built by government subsidies, especially under the leadership of President Domingo F. Sarmiento from 1868 to 1874. Primary education is compulsory and free, but further training is expensive. However, more than 900,000 were enrolled in colleges and universities. Argentina has 24 national universities and many state and private universities. The principal institution is the University of Buenos Aires (1821).

The following is a partial list of the Universities I toured:

1. Universidad Nacional Mar del Plata, Faculty of Engineering
2. Universidad Nacional del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires – Tandil, Faculty of Engineering
3. Universidad Nacional del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires – Olavarría, Faculty of Engineering
4. Universidad Atlantida Argentina – Mar del Ajo, Faculty of Engineering

**Cultural**

Argentina is a nation with a rich Spanish heritage, strongly influenced by a great wave of foreign immigration that began in the early 1880s and lasted for a decade, notably Italian immigration. At that time, Italians along with some Spaniards arrived to open the pampas. A lively interest is maintained in the nation’s history, particularly as symbolized by the gaucho (cowboy). The gaucho folk song and folk dance are some of the most important components of traditional Argentine music. The tango, which developed in Buenos Aires and became a favorite ballroom dance throughout much of the world, is perhaps Argentina’s most famous contribution to modern music.

Argentina claimed its independence from Spain in 1816, and has since experienced periods of internal political conflict between conservatives and liberals and between civilian and military factions. After World War II, a long period of Peronist dictatorship was followed by a military dictatorship that took power in 1976. Democracy returned in 1983, with free elections led by two primary parties. Even with the return to democracy, Argentina’s troubles were far from being over. The people are enduring an economic recession that began 20 years ago. The recession was worsened with the privatization of the state owned industries and the devaluation of the peso. The stress of this recession is on everyone’s mind, however, the spirit of the Argentineans is undaunted and they are determined to see their nation through to better times.

Being from North America, we associate South America with our closest neighbor to the south, Mexico. Although both country’s ethnic origin is Spain, the differences are dramatic. The largest difference is that most of Argentina’s immigrants came from Italy and as a result Argentine Spanish, known as “Castellano,” bears some inflections found in Italian. These same characteristics are also found in the other countries surrounding the Río de la Plata. The language is definitely Spanish, but flows with a much greater Italian rhythm. The other difference would be found in their wonderful food. We were surprised to find the absence of any of the traditional Mexican dishes, Spanish rice, refried beans, tacos, etc., and treated to banquets of their delicious beef and wine.

Some of the cultural highlights that we learned about were the:
- Perone dynasty
- History of the Gaucho
- Frontier forts
- Argentine Indians
- Catholic Churches
- Falklands War
- Castallino language
- Calvary Military
- Traipse Monastery
- Beautiful Estancias (large ranch)

**Fellowship**

The most memorable part of the trip would have to be the beautiful people of Argentina and the way that they made us feel loved. In almost every city from which we departed, there was an exchange of email addresses and a tearful farewell.

These are a few of my favorite moments:
- Meeting Rotary members who were part of a GSE to the United States
- Meeting an American basketball player in the middle of the Pampas
- Going to a Traipse Monastery in the middle of nowhere and being greeted by a Monk with a New Jersey accent
- Horseback riding through the campos (countryside)
- Enjoying their wonderful beef and wine
- Hunting on a 10,000 acre estanchia
- Attending a 200-year celebration of the Argentine Cavalry, which included a charge of 250 horsemen in the uniforms of various historical periods.
- Countless memories with our host families, from sharing in their family dinners to exchanging language lessons with their children
• Forming a bond with Argentina’s GSE Team to southern Illinois, both in Argentina and in the United States
• Learning the great goodness that Rotary represents by getting to know the type of people involved

With good planning, goal-driven design, and active participation of a dedicated Rotarian, a GSE can be an exceptional educational experience.

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References