

**REPORTING ON INTERNATIONALIZATION  
AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES**

**ISSUE TWO**

*Follow the Sun*  
*Internationalizing the Community College  
Business Curriculum*

**MICHIGAN STATE**  
**UNIVERSITY**



**Community Colleges for  
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AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES**

## Follow the Sun

### Internationalizing the Community College Business Curriculum

The use of virtual teams in the workplace is not a new phenomenon, but the last five years have seen rapid growth in its proliferation among companies, particularly multinationals. Improvements in the quality of communication technology offered at low to no-cost has made this an attractive option for companies seeking to improve productivity and to attract top and diverse talent while simultaneously cutting travel and relocation costs. It also provides a cost-effective way for companies to offer 24-7 client support with employee shifts that “follow the sun,” as opposed to requiring a co-located team to work multiple or overnight shifts to achieve the same coverage. A 2012 survey by SHRM showed that nearly half of all organizations polled used virtual teams, 66% for multinationals. The reported top reason for implementing them was to boost collaboration among employees.

Virtual teams, if managed correctly, can improve productivity. The ability to easily incorporate diverse talent from anywhere in the world has many benefits, including prevention of a “group think” mentality that can occur in homogenous groups. In a global marketplace, this is vital.

In a 2014 Huffpost Business Blog post, digital marketer Frankie Rendon writes, “Missed opportunities for marketing, sales, and management abound when team member diversity is not embraced. Marketing gaffs happen often when teams are centrally

located in the United States, and the culture of the customer is not embraced. This is not the fault of the team members; it is the fault of a hiring a homogenous team with little understanding of cultural differences and dynamics. Virtual teams that span the globe help to ensure that marketing communication messages are effective, timely, and not offensive.”

Aside from the obvious challenges of time zones and communication styles, leadership in this new platform is a serious concern. Rendon writes, “...it is important to look that the leadership skills necessary for managing these teams. Professionals that have vast experience in managing in-house, onsite corporate teams, often lack the base skills necessary for success in the virtual world. One of the strengths of a virtual team is the range of experience and knowledge that stems from a variety of professional backgrounds, and cultural backgrounds.”

In the December 2014 issue of *Harvard Business Review*, an article on virtual teams cites a study conducted with 80 engineering firms, which determined, among other things, that the best predictor of success for leaders of dispersed teams is experience doing it before, concluding that practice of certain behaviors is vital.

#### Meanwhile in Academia

So, how are community colleges preparing students for this workplace reality? Online learning at community colleges has been commonplace for a couple of decades, but examples of exercises in cross-cultural collaboration and virtual team leadership, while desired, are few and far between.

Community colleges have long prided themselves on their delivery of practical education that is aligned with and responsive to the dynamic needs of employers. This goal drives curriculum and programming across all departments, affecting students seeking an edge in the workplace as well as those planning to continue their education. Internships and advisory councils are two common ways for institutions to achieve this. As globalization and the phenomenon of global virtual teams are changing the workplace at astounding rates, are these skills part of the “skills gap” conversation? If so, how are students receiving the practice they need to succeed?

#### One Approach

One such model to explore is a collaboration among the business departments of three community/technical colleges: RMIT in Melbourne, Australia; Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa; and Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) in Dundalk, Ireland. RMIT and Kirkwood launched this endeavor back in 2010 and added DkIT in 2014, with a fourth country/institution currently under consideration. These institutions offer a joint marketing management course designed to give students experience in global virtual teamwork as they complete a marketing and communication plan for a “real” client.

The concept grew out of a meeting between business faculty members from RMIT and Kirkwood at a conference. Mark Abel, Professor and Coordinator of Marketing and Marketing Management at Kirkwood, and Graham Airey, then business faculty but now RMIT’s Head of School, Vocational Business Education, both came from institutions that were ahead of the curve in international partnerships and study abroad programs. The interests of these two faculty members were well within the mission of their respective institutions, yet their idea was innovative on two other fronts: the use of cross cultural virtual teams and the practice of working for a “real” client. They agreed on a plan and decided that institutions would alternate “hosting” duties.

#### How It Works

Students from each institution register for the appropriate marketing management course at their home institution, yet they are all entered into one course on the host college’s learning management system (Blackboard or Moodle, for example). The students are then divided into mixed teams. All teams receive the same assignment, which is a project that requires a marketing and communications plan from an organization or company in the host college’s country. For example, a few years ago Australia’s Department of Transport asked the teams to create a marketing plan to address the challenge of

getting young people in Australia to wear seatbelts, which was a real problem they were facing. To understand the core of the problem, US students had to understand the cultural and generational issues in Australia. They also had to understand the psyche of the Australian youth in order to create a message that would resonate in that culture. In the spring 2016 course, hosted by the Australians, the Australian Department of Tourism posed the challenge of creating a marketing and communications plan that will get Australians and other countries to recognize Melbourne as a “Knowledge City,” similar to the reputation of places such as Dublin, San Francisco, and Silicon Valley. Students

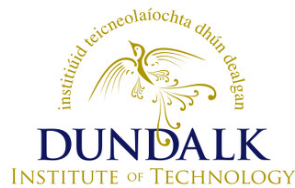
*“Missed opportunities for marketing, sales, and management abound when team member diversity is not embraced... Virtual teams that span the globe help to ensure that marketing communication messages are effective, timely, and not offensive.”*

FRANKIE RENDON



Mark Abel, Professor and Coordinator of Marketing and Marketing Management at Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, pictured in front of the offices of their partner, the Australian Department of Transport.





must find a way to raise brand awareness among Australian citizens, as well as in the wider global market.

The course kicked off with a live chat with a representative from the Department of Tourism who explained the challenge and responded to questions from the students. The groups then turn to platforms such as Google Docs and Google Hangouts to collaborate on deliverables and to hold virtual meetings, which are required once per week. The students quickly realize they must navigate the challenges of time zones, which can be as different

as 17 hours, and communication styles, which are what professionals in the workplace wrestle with constantly. The groups' research and collaboration culminates in a presentation for the Department of Tourism, which selects a winning team.

### The Travel Option

The second and optional component to this course is the opportunity to travel to the host institution's country at the end of the semester to make the final presentation and to engage in other typical study abroad programming. In fact, at Kirkwood this component is technically considered a second course, treated as any

other study abroad course at the college, all which use the course prefix of GLS (Global Studies). Students register for and pay for it separately through the college's international programs office. For the lead faculty member, the study abroad component is treated as an additional course in the overall teaching load, as it requires substantial planning and responsibilities, as well as leadership during the trip.

*Faculty from the participating institutions collaborate on all components of the course, including student evaluation and leadership of the study abroad component. According to Abel, the faculty learn much from the students and from the different generations, particularly when it comes to technology.*



U.S. students participating in the 2014 Ireland Department of Tourism project. Participants from the three countries were divided among 8 teams, with 10-12 students per team.

In May 2016, students from Kirkwood and DkIT will be traveling to Australia to make their presentations to the Department of Tourism. The program includes time for the groups to work together in preparation for the presentations, as well as visits to industry and campus, and cultural activities. The 17-day trip runs \$3500 for Kirkwood students, but those with a 2.5 GPA or greater receive a \$1000 scholarship from the Kirkwood Foundation, which is part of Kirkwood's larger commitment to internationalization efforts and getting students and faculty abroad.

Faculty from the participating institutions collaborate on all components of the course, including student evaluation and leadership of the study abroad component. According to Abel, the faculty learn much from the students and from the different generations, particularly when it comes to technology. There is also a unique learning opportunity on the study abroad component when the trip involves at more than just

two cultures. For example, there were differences in how the Australians and Americans reacted to their experiences in Ireland.

### Best Practices

Sally Parrot, the lead instructor from RMIT, says one of the greatest lessons they have learned over the past five years of running the virtual global project has been that success depends on the dedication and passion of the faculty and staff involved, which is paramount. Another critical success factor is the support from the school and the interest and involvement of the client.

### Additional words of wisdom for others considering this model include:

#### Commit to Communicate

Constant communication is vital, and with many time zones separating participating colleges, faculty (and students) must be willing to be available at all hours of the day and night to accomplish tasks.

#### Choose Partners Wisely

The lead faculty from the participating institutions need to have the same interest level, commitment, and sense of urgency to



Kirkwood's "Group 4" on the Ireland Department of Tourism project.



ensure all phases of the program run smoothly. From marketing the course to students, to physically leading the study abroad component, it's important that the faculty are prepared for the amount of work above and beyond a "regular" classroom or online course. But beyond faculty, the mission and core values of the institutions should align. In the case of this program, all the institutions are open access community or technical colleges, or, in RMIT's case, a similarly missioned division within the university.

#### Secure Administrative Support

All partner institutions should know where their administration stands on its willingness to support the program financially and philosophically, as implementation requires some processes that go beyond the normal protocol. Course leaders need the support of other faculty, the international programs office, and administrative staff to execute a successful program. Proper training and

support for the international travel component cannot be overlooked and must be taken seriously, as a misstep can ensure the end of such courses, or worse, study abroad programs in general.

#### Monitor Student Engagement

Teamwork is challenging, even when all parties are in the same classroom, so virtual collaboration can present a whole new level of challenges. Proper training on the tools and resources available to students to accomplish tasks will ensure success. Fortunately, as most of the students tend to be digital natives, this has not posed much of a challenge in the Kirkwood program. However, they must learn to use the professional platforms used in business, which extend beyond social media. It seems the real-world component of the team project, and the reality of traveling abroad to meet peers and teammates motivate the students to work hard and to persist in this course.



Global teams are expected to hold real-time meetings using Google Hangouts, even when team members are separated by as many as 17 hours. From left to right: Shawn McGarvy, Team Captain Wafaa Alherz, and James McClain.

#### Benefits to Students

The design of this course provides many opportunities for students to practice and build global competencies, thus giving them confidence in their ability to be competitive in the job market. Parrot adds, "Translating the virtual global project experience into employability skills has allowed students to stand out amongst job applicants and in their applications for studying higher degrees. Anecdotally, students have told us that they were able to speak in interviews for a higher degree and for work about the intercultural communication skills they developed during their virtual global project."

Abel echoes these sentiments: "All the time we hear from students that this experience on their resume makes the difference in a job interview. It's the number one topic interviewers are interested in." While most business programs teach students how to market themselves, it's particularly important that they know how to articulate the unique skills gained in this course. This type of experience sets them apart and gives them the edge.

#### A Myth-Buster

While the study abroad component is not required for this course, most students want and choose to participate. In fact, Kirkwood had twice as many applications as spaces available on the trip for spring 2016, and this trip comes with a \$2500-\$3500 price tag. Too often community college leadership dismisses study abroad programs because the assumption is that students cannot afford it. But as with any budget process, the money goes toward what is valued. Kirkwood, for example, builds a culture that embraces global learning as a core value, which includes introducing study abroad as an expectation from the first time a student tours the campus. Scholarships available to both students and faculty/staff to participate in study

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abroad make the concept a reality for people who would otherwise assume it's not for them. Chances are a study abroad flier hanging on the wall would never have captured the attention of the students traveling to Australia, particularly for \$3500. However, the deliberate design of this marketing management course, with the integration of a meaningful experience abroad, highlights the value of global learning to students who recognize that they need these skills to be competitive in their future pursuits. Having to turn away students away from study abroad because space is limited is a problem, but it's a problem any community college would be happy to have.

**More than 50% of GE's workforce is located overseas.**

**Nestle's foreign sales are 97.8% of its total sales, thus making it vital that marketing staff understand or come from multiple cultures.**

**70% of the world's buying power comes from outside of the United States.**

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Groups are enriched by the participation of non-traditional students. Danny John, left, was the team leader for "Group 5" on the 2014 Ireland project.





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