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The Transformative Power of Faculty Development Abroad: A Romanian Scholar's Role to Internationalization of Higher Education

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Romania: an exceptional country to study

Romania and United States have a lot in common: they are both unique and atypical countries. We are all, of course, aware of the American exceptionalism starting with its origins, melting pot of ethnicities, old democracy and entrepreneurial spirit, but little is known about Romania's special place in the world. At Kennesaw State University, we have decided that the time had come to find out more about Romania. As a Romanian native and leader of the Year of Romania Program (2010-2011), my goal was to introduce my campus community to its diverse history, geography, art and culture.

Romania is a truly exceptional nation of Eastern Europe. Although Americans typically place it in the former Soviet communist bloc, the Romanian culture and ethos is primarily Latin. By the name of Dacia in the ancient times, it briefly became one of the most remote provinces of the Roman Empire. The Roman occupation lasted only from 105-271, but it left a rich long-term legacy. The Romanian language is one of the Romance languages closest to the popular Latin of the ancient times. What makes Romania more exceptional, unlike Spain, France, Portugal and Italy, is that it is the only country that preserved the name of its Roman conquerors. A symbolic gesture indeed since despite its geographic location at the borderland of Europe, the Romanians had always aspired to belong to the west.

A closer look at the Romanian history shows the exceptional resilience of its people. At the crossroads of Europe, the Romanians had to face almost every year the hordes of Slavic tribes, Visigoths, Huns, Tatars, and later on, the fierce domination of the Ottoman Empire. This is how Romania has become a Latin island in a sea of Slavic cultures. While stubbornly preserving the Latin roots of their culture and identity, the Romanians embraced ethnic minorities from the entire region: Hungarian, German, Jewish, Turkish, Russian, Ukrainian, Serbian and many others. Romania is also the home of one of the largest Roma population in the world estimated at 1.5- 2 million people. (Romania Census 2011)

The history of Romanian communism is also exceptional. When the "red plague" of communism conquered Eastern Europe, Romania had quickly become one of the most rigid and oppressive communist regimes in the Eastern bloc, while Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu became one of the most infamous dictators of post-war Europe. Romanian communism collapsed in the bloodshed of 1,200 victims. While other European countries had "velvet revolutions", the Romanian dictators were executed in front of the firing squad and the Romanian revolution of 1989 had become the first revolution "on the air" in the history of mankind.

These are only a few reasons why the academic year 2010-2011 had been the Year of Romania at Kennesaw State University. This large university in metropolitan Atlanta had organized the Annual Country Study Program for the past 30 years in order to foster global learning and internationalize the college experience. The program's goal is to engage the university with local and international communities and break down stereotypes about various world cultures. Through weekly events, students and faculty learn about the country's political, historical, religious, artistic, social and economic contexts. The faculty learning communities are central to this global learning program. During monthly meetings, faculty support and stimulate each other in the advanced study of the country through readings, lectures, and sharing their own research.

Leading the Faculty Development Seminar to Romania

As an organizer of the Year of Romania Program, I attended monthly planning committee meetings, monthly faculty learning community meetings, attended practically all of the lectures

in the series, co-led the faculty development seminar to Romania, delivered two lectures in the series, developed a learning course module, planned the invited speakers' visits to campus, helped organize and promote a musical concert, served as co-editor for the special issue on Romania of the *Journal for Global Initiatives*, led a study abroad program to Romania, and taught a spring semester course with a comparative focus on US versus Romanian society. My role as a cultural broker helped me "translate" my own culture to an American audience, as well as learn more about my own culture from the eyes of "the other". I have often used sociological and comparative lenses to explain issues related to identity, gender, race and ethnicity or transition from communism to capitalist society to the faculty learning community.

The Faculty Development Seminar to Romania took place on February 25 – March 11 2011. The group mirrored the diversity of US academia and had different research interests on Romania: a Peruvian-born immigrant interested in the gypsy minority, a Puerto Rican professor researching the Latin roots of the Romanian language, a New York Jewish professor observing the Holocaust legacy in Eastern Europe, a Romanian native scholar acting as a guide to her country, an Indian-born scholar interested in political systems in transition, a Chinese-born scholar focusing on child rearing practices under communism, a mid-westerner of German ancestry interested in a comparative perspective on nutrition and health habits and a US born international education professional of Czech ancestry.

During the two weeks of intense learning, the KSU faculty delivered lectures and attended presentations at leading institutions of higher education in Romania. In addition to their packed academic schedule, they enjoyed traditional cuisine at historic inns, visited Human Rights NGOs, attended opera concerts, visited Peles Royal Castle and Bran (also called Dracula's) Castle in Transylvania and wandered through the streets of Sighisoara, one of the best preserved medieval castles in Europe. They had bonded through poems and songs improvised on the bus all the way from Transylvania to Moldavia, where they visited the famous orthodox monasteries with frescoes on their exterior walls that are part of the UNESCO World Heritage. Caught in a snowstorm at Voronet, close to the northern border with Ukraine, they shared popular folk tales and fables with locals over hot sour soup (ciorba) and polenta (mamaliga).

Impact on Teaching and Research

When I volunteered to co-lead the Faculty Development Seminar to Romania, I had considered it a service to the KSU community as well as service for my country. The more I got involved with it through interactions with colleagues from my own university and abroad, the more I realized the enormous potential of such a program to expand my own scholarship. Next, I am going to describe the transformative impact of this global faculty initiative on my teaching and research hoping that it will incentivize other colleagues worldwide to incorporate international programs into their teaching and research agendas.

First of all, I have developed two new courses. *SOCI 4490: Comparative Sociology: US and Romania* was offered in Spring 2011 and expanded the Cultural Diversity concentration of our Sociology curriculum. For instance, during Tuesday classes, the students and faculty focused on an in-depth understanding of readings on Romania while the whole class attended the Year of Romania lectures on Thursday. Consequently, the students had the opportunity to meet, interact and learn from the top specialists on Romania in a variety of fields ranging from economy, political science, sociology, art, literature, religion etc. I had also developed a new study abroad course entitled *SOCI 4490: Advanced Qualitative Research in France and Romania* that was offered in summer 2011. Most of the students enrolled in the Comparative Sociology course

have decided to take the trip to Romania and explore its culture and society on site. Therefore, the study abroad program to Romania had a record enrollment of 30 students.

Teaching these two sequenced courses proved to be one of the most rewarding experiences of my academic career. During the Comparative Sociology course, the students had the opportunity to expand their understanding of global societies by exploring issues related to gender, race and ethnicity, family, social class, politics, economy, social change, culture and health care of US versus other countries. The students developed a research proposal that was used to collect data and complete a research project during the summer study abroad. These two sequenced courses turned out to be the ideal method of combining sociological theory and practice.

The Faculty Development Seminar to Romania offered the unique opportunity to strengthen relationships and network with scholars both in US and Romania. Our university had developed partnerships with five leading Romanian universities: University of Bucharest, University of Brasov, University of Craiova, Dimitrie Cantemir University and ASEBUSS (Romanian- American Executive MBA Program). We have exchanged not only students, but had initiated different collaborative projects involving summer study abroad programs and research. In the end, some of the KSU faculty were invited to teach as visiting faculty at our Romanian partner universities.

The impact on my professional development as a teacher and scholar had been significant. I have prepared and delivered two presentations in the Year of Romania Lecture Series entitled *From American Dream to Ethnic Hate: A Comparison of Romanian Immigration to United States and European Union* and *"The Gypsy Problem": Human Rights and Ethnic Minorities in Romania*, and consequently, have published two articles in peer-reviewed journals on these topics¹. The popularity of the Year of Romania Program at KSU, especially the genuine curiosity of students and faculty, were decisive factors in expanding my research agenda to include contemporary social issues related to Romania. Consequently, I am currently working on two book projects related to Romania. The first book project entitled *Stories of Romanian Immigration to US* is a collection of narratives and life histories gathered by Sociology students from Romanian immigrants in metropolitan Atlanta. This intercultural learning project was enthusiastically embraced by students interested in taking an active role in the research process, as well as in being more engaged in their diverse communities. The second book project entitled *New Perspectives on Contemporary Romanian Society* is an edited book that will compile the most significant academic lectures of the Year of Romania Program. In addition to research, my professional service engagement included serving as a guest editor for the special issue on Romania of the Journal for Global Initiatives.

In conclusion, I hope that the KSU model of Faculty Development Abroad will provide inspiration for colleagues both in the US and overseas. I cannot think of any other professional development opportunity that can have a more powerful and lasting impact on transforming the curriculum, inspiring the teaching and energizing the research as a faculty seminar abroad. On a personal level, colleagues from inside our institution and our partners abroad have become

¹ Otovescu-Frasie, Cristina, Lepadatu, Darina*. 2010. "Human Rights and Discrimination of Roma Minority in European Union: Case Studies from Romania". *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences*. 4 (7): 159-170 (*authors contributed equally to the article)

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together a community of learners genuinely caring about each other and embracing our differences. We have become not only more mature teachers and researchers, but also better colleagues and human beings in this transformative learning experience of internationalization.

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