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Meeting at the Crossroads

An Illinois Wesleyan delegation to Morocco begins what may become a lasting exchange of ideas and friendship.

By RACHEL HATCH

A group of nine faculty and staff from Illinois Wesleyan University traveled halfway around the world this summer to help establish ties with a university in Morocco. The participants were part of the Morocco Initiative, sent to the North African nation to explore possible collaborative projects, discuss research and get acquainted with their counterparts at Al Akhawayn University (AUI) in Ifrane, Morocco.

“We came to Morocco to learn, to experience and to share,” said Associate Dean of Curriculum Zahia Drici, who led the group of five faculty and two staff members along with International Office Director Stacey Shimizu. Those chosen for the initiative were Academic Outreach Librarian and Associate Professor Lynda Duke, University Communications Staff Writer Rachel Hatch, Environmental Studies Director and Associate Professor of Environmental Studies and International Studies Abigail Jahiel, Hispanic Studies Chair and Professor Carolyn Nadeau, Chair and Associate Professor of Economics Diego Méndez-Carbajo, Associate Professor of Economics Ilaria Ossella-Durbal and Career Consultant Robyn Walter.

Drici said she believes the trip was a success, judging from the positive response the Illinois Wesleyan group received from Moroccan educators. “Their strong interest in learning more about our own institution — about its people, policies, procedures and programs — gave us an opportunity to begin exploring the feasibility of establishing cooperation and exchange programs for students, faculty and staff,” she said.

What follows are excerpts edited from a blog that University Communications Staff Writer Rachel Hatch wrote during her week in Morocco.



The Wesleyan contingent took time out to explore Casablanca's medina, where shopkeepers lure customers with their colorful merchandise. (Photo by Rachel Hatch)

Friday, June 12, 2009

Today marks the beginning of a journey to meet Morocco.

At first glance, this is the country that fits its picture-postcard image, right down to the swaying palm trees. Yet to say one knows an entire country at first meeting is as naïve as saying one knows everything about a person with one look.

Morocco is a country that counts time in millennia rather than centuries. Its people have seen the coming of the Romans, Portuguese, Spanish and French, who pulled Morocco into empires that no longer exist. Amid the bustle of the marketplaces and the quiet of the mosques, there is a feeling of steadfastness and calm. No matter how transient the world and the people who pass over her, Morocco remains Morocco.

As much as we are tempted to place people and countries in neat categories, this nation defies easy definition. Although we know it as Morocco, its official name is Al-Mamlaka al-Maghribiya: The Kingdom of the West. It is a crossroads of Africa, the Middle East, Europe and the traditional Berber, or

Amazigh, tribes. The country has been a gateway for differing cultures to convene. Signs are printed in Arabic, French and English.

Remnants of the French Protectorate, which dominated this country from 1912 to 1956, are still visible. Although Arabic is the official language, French is often used in matters of business and government. And those picture-perfect palm trees? They were imported by the French and the British; another lesson in how travel presents a time to learn and re-learn what we think we know.

Members of our Illinois Wesleyan group have been flying into Casablanca, Morocco's largest city, over the past 24 hours from various places around the globe. When all assembled, we will travel down the coast tomorrow to several towns, and then head east to meet with educators at the capital of Rabat. After that, we will journey to Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, up in the Middle Atlas Mountains.

For now, we are sitting at a corner café in Casablanca, practicing ways to pronounce the Moroccan version of Arabic, rather than the way it is spoken in Egypt or Jordan. Sipping mint teas and cafés au lait, we sought linguistic advice from Zahia Drici, who grew up in France and spent time in nearby Algiers. She smiles with the same patience as many of the Moroccans we have met as we try to fold our clumsy tongues around their elegant language.

Saturday, June 13

On the narrow streets of the Moroccan medinas, lessons in culture come easy. All you have to do is shop.

The word medina literally means “town,” and represents the older portions of towns, around which current cities have grown. The center of each medina is a mosque, and the medinas are usually surrounded by gates or ramparts. Within the walls are mazes of winding roads and alleys, with shopkeepers selling goods of vibrant colors, from rugs and jewelry to hand-blown glass lamps and exotic spices. Owners call out in many languages — including English — to lure customers, declaring their shops are good luck and have items as beautiful as the women who stroll by.

Bartering is the standard, and the price on the tag is never the price. Bartering is also not for the faint-hearted, as I learned entering a shop with Robyn Walter, who came to Morocco to study and assist efforts here to combat white-collar unemployment. As it turns out, today she did a bit of combat of her own.

The savvy shopkeeper offered a price and gasped in horror at Robyn's counter-offer. I watched in awe as a mini-drama unfolded.

ROBYN: It's not that it's not nice. It's a matter of what I have in my wallet. No.

SHOPKEEPER: Please, please! Now it is not a matter of price, it is a matter of karma.

(The shopkeeper lowers the price again, but not to Robyn's price.)

ROBYN: *(calmly)*: No, no thank you.

(Robyn turns to walk away. The shopkeeper dramatically turns to a man sitting near her and shouts in Arabic. Without looking up, the man gives a curt nod.)

SHOPKEEPER *(smiling)*: Okay

Bartering itself is simply another social interaction, a sign of friendliness and respect. When I tried moments later, and caved miserably soon, the same shopkeeper shook her head in mock shame for me. “Bad deal!” I could not help but laugh and say, “Bad deal, but good karma?” She agreed and joined in the laughter.

Sunday, June 14

What is it that makes us fall in love? What is that spark, that moment of connection that makes one place stay in our hearts? How often can we pinpoint a moment when that transformation takes place?

For me, I fell in love with Morocco last evening as I sat in the restaurant of Casablanca’s Hotel Guynemer with our group from Illinois Wesleyan, clapping along to the songs of the oud player. The hotel director, Mustapha — whose huge smile is matched only by his savvy for knowing what his visitors need — joined along with a set of hand-made Moroccan drums, crafted with goatskin. It was then that Morocco felt like home.

Casablanca, like most big cities, displays stark dichotomies. Modern buildings of glass and steel exude prosperity while old medinas fold tradition into everyday life. A favorite image from Casablanca was watching an older man pulling his wares in a donkey-driven cart along a busy, six-lane road. A driver in a sleek, black Mercedes gave a quick honk to let the old man know he was passing. The old man waved to the driver, who smiled and shouted “Saha!” — a common way of saying thank you.

A much more massive symbol of Morocco’s combination of tradition and progress is the Hassan II Mosque. Completed in 1993, the structure is a tribute to King Hassan II, who ruled Morocco from 1961 to 1999. Everything is the best — cedar wood, titanium doors, shining marble and plaster carved with such intricacy it resembles lace along the walls. Our guide tells us more than 10,000 craftsman carved that artistry into that plaster. Breathtaking walls ascend to a dome that can open to bring sun and air to the 25,000 worshippers the mosque can accommodate. There’s room for another 80,000 to take part in prayers outside on the marble grounds that surround the minaret (or tower) rising more than 650 feet into the sky.

I have most often felt like a welcome foreigner during my days in Morocco. But, as I walked with required bare feet across the cool marble floors, I now felt like an interloper — no matter how friendly the tour guide or how many polite nods I received from security guards. I later realized that my discomfort in the mosque stemmed from my own ignorance of the religion that has inspired this and every mosque in the country. Morocco prides itself on its openness toward other religions and has been a safe haven for non-Islamic people. Yet here, Islam is a way of life. And I felt a pang of guilt that I professed to love Morocco without understanding such an important part of it. I hope my time here brings me closer to understanding.

Monday, June 15

Our group’s stop in the capital city of Rabat centered on visits with faculty and administrators at Mohammed V University. Founded in 1957 by royal decree, it is considered Morocco’s first modern university.



The minaret of the Hassan II Mosque (above), the world’s third largest mosque, ascends more than 600 feet. (Photo by Rachel Hatch)

What we thought would be a meet-and-greet became a sharing of research and teaching ideologies. Several of the Mohammed V professors discussed their research and commented on how much they would love to create connections with American universities. Much of Moroccan higher education is based upon a French model, they explained, but the country has been moving toward integrating American styles of teaching.

Scholars from Mohammed V and Illinois Wesleyan quickly found common ground in their areas of expertise. “This is what it is all about,” Carolyn Nadeau whispered to me at the table as people talked in several languages. “This is where we build those international bridges.” Carolyn is researching the role that Moroccan Amazigh (or Berber) tribes played in influencing today’s Spanish cuisine. After the meeting, she left to meet with a retired professor who is published on the topic of Moroccan influences when it comes to food.

“You can read all you want about food,” Carolyn explained, “but to be there makes everything come to life. In the marketplaces where they sell the spices, you can feel the texture, ask the sellers how they use them at home and in what regions they originated. There is nothing else like it.”

As a professional career consultant, Robyn Walter drew special attention from the Mohammed V administrators. A recent Moroccan government report declared that universities are not preparing students for the job market, creating a high number of highly educated unemployed. An emergency plan is being enacted, with many steps that mirror Robyn’s current work at Illinois Wesleyan with students in the Career Center. Her advice brought nods of appreciation.



The director of the National Library of Morocco in Rabat, Abdelati Lahlou (second from the right), spoke with members of the IWU group about the preservation of historical manuscripts dating back to the 12th century. Pictured with him are (left to right) Ilaria Ossella-Durbal, Abigail Jahiel, Lynda Duke, Zahia Drici and Carolyn Nadeau. (Photo by Diego Mendez-Carbajo)

Director Abdelati Lahlou.

At Mohammed V, Academic Outreach Librarian Lynda Duke was able to visit the library, her second library of the day. Earlier, the entire group was invited to tour the National Library of Morocco, located in Rabat. The director led us through the elegant, glass-and-wood lobby (the highest quality cedar is used to repel the constant humidity), and spoke of the library’s collections.

The library’s main focus is to create a collection of cultural archives. “This is really the traditional role of libraries,” explained Lynda. “They were meant to keep the manuscripts for use by scholars and clergy.” The new National Library of Morocco is continuing that tradition, with more than 33,000 rare manuscripts, as well as a growing collection of book, periodicals, multi-media and databases.

“More than the physical conservation of these rare documents is a chance to communicate with future generations the heritage of Morocco,” explained Library

“It is marvelous,” said Lynda. “You can tell there is a focus on scholarly research, but the building has also been designed to be open to as many people as possible, from the expansive lobby where the community can hold exhibitions, to the glass walls inviting in the public. I could have spent two more days there.”

More days could not be spared, however, as we headed out of Rabat, and on to Ifrane and AUI.

Tuesday, June 16

The heat and dust of the cities dissolved into the lush green of Ifrane, rising 5,000 feet into the Middle Atlas Mountains, as we make our way to Al Akhawayn University.

Once a resort town for the wealthy French colonials of the Protectorate, the Ifrane hills now hold a jewel in the Moroccan educational system that is AUI. The beautiful campus is home to more than 1,300 students and more than 90 professors.

AUI is a private university, created by royal decree by King Hassan II and opened in 1995. The university is coeducational, residential and primarily undergraduate, but has rapidly growing graduate programs in areas such as computer science and business.

At AUI, all classes are taught in English. “It’s very different from the French system to which we are accustomed,” said Wafa Abuad, a graduate student in international relations at AUI who took us on a campus tour. “French professors expect you to come and write down everything they say and memorize it. It is a lot of recitation.

“We actually have classes on campus to teach students how to study in the American system,” said Wafa, “taking notes, writing papers that are more based on arguments than explanation, taking exams that are not from recitation.”

After the tour, our group separates to meet with counterparts — dinner that night is filled with conversations of collaborations being formed, research discussed and adventures of the day. For my part, I wanted to learn more about the students of Morocco. The group has talked of the potential of future student and faculty exchanges with AUI. But would our students feel at home?

Sitting in the Student Activities Office, Director Lelia Labbar laughs with students, switching quickly from French to Arabic to English. The office is a flurry of students, working on the student newspaper (published in all three languages), planning for the next weekend excursion for students into the smaller villages, looking for props for a play scheduled to open at the university theater that night.

“Our students work on many levels,” said Lelia, “volunteering for the community (AUI requires 60 hours of community service), working with clubs, traveling. They look to be exposed to the world outside of AUI, and outside of the world in which they were raised.”

Lelia, an AUI graduate, takes the university’s international mission seriously. As a student, she entered an exchange program that took her to a university in Montana in 2006. “It was very difficult to make friends,” she recalled, “and the international office was not helpful in having the students get to know one another. I vowed not to let that happen to anyone else.” Her office works to reserve slots on trips and events for international students, encouraging them to mix with Moroccan students.



IWU’s Morocco Initiative traveled the country to discover opportunities for academic and cultural exchanges. Among the group’s stops was El Jadida, a port city along Morocco’s Atlantic coast known for its massive Portuguese walls of hewn stone. (Photo by Carolyn Nadeau)

Creating rewarding interactions between Moroccan and international students has also been a priority of Dr. Driss Ouaouicha, who is AUI's new president. "The goal is try and disseminate Moroccan culture to the international students with classes in language and culture and society, as well as interaction with other students. At the same time, we teach the Moroccan students something of the outside world, and the American, or Anglo-Saxon, system of education."

President Ouaouicha is candid about the challenges facing Morocco's higher-educational system. "Many of the universities would offer knowledge, and it was assumed those graduates would take government jobs," he explained. "When the government slowed in their hiring, the education system did not change."

The American system of teaching incorporates flexibility, such as changing majors and adapting to student evolving talents, said President Ouaouicha. AUI has become a model for other Moroccan universities to experiment with the American system. "The system is still evolving. Fifteen years ago we were talking about strategies that focused on faculty. Now we are talking about outcomes based on student needs."



Wednesday, June 17

Al Akhawayn University's Linguistics Professor Naceur Amakhmakh gave us a quick lesson in the Moroccan dialect this morning. He started off by offering his hand with a greeting of "Labas?" (How are you?). Startled, we caught on that he wanted us to imitate his words. Back and forth he went around our semi-circle, increasing phrases with grand pantomime, and no English allowed. The more we learned, the more he encouraged us to become part of the stories.

There may be many things to overcome when traveling — language is just one of them. People say to travel is to learn about more than the surroundings — it is to learn something about yourself and to confront preconceived notions.

What did I learn on this trip? I learned that Morocco is more than ancient buildings; it is the people who live here. From the sellers in the marketplace to university officials, all carry a pride of their country they honor with a friendly nature that welcomes others.

**Students head to class at Al Akhawayn.
(Photo by Diego Mendez-Carbajo)**

I learned that sometimes the best way to discover something is to become lost in it. Sadly for me, this usually meant literally getting lost. But if I had not been lost, I would not have seen a centuries-old manuscript being preserved in microfiche at the National Library. Nor would I have stumbled across a quiet amphitheatre at AUI where a gardener kindly brushed off a seat so I could rest and study my map.

Lessons come in many forms — from sitting at a table with students boisterously telling stories and teasing about getting the last prune in a tajine, to trying to figure out how to do something as simple as laundry and realizing your high school French class never covered "How much detergent do I need?"

I admit my education included gaining a keen appreciation for every member of our group. I found myself hit with a pang of envy for all their students, and had the wonderful realization that I work in a place that gives me the opportunity to be inspired every day.

Soon we will say goodbye to Morocco — the ancient medinas and the modern cities, the oud music and the cuisine filled with spices and history. Now, however, the doors are open. And I hope it will be a little easier for others to follow us through them.