



Summer 7-15-2009

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Recommended Citation

Hatch, Rachel, "Building International Bridges" (2009). *News and Events*. 5648.
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/5648>

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July 15, 2009

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Building International Bridges

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – A group of nine faculty and staff from Illinois Wesleyan University recently traveled half way around the world 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 meet with 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, Environmental Studies Director and Associate Professor of Environmental Studies and International Studies Abigail Jahiel, Hispanic Studies Chair and Professor Carolyn Nadeau, Associate Professor of Economics Diego Mendez-Carbajo, Associate Professor of Economics Ilaria Ossella-Durbal, University of Communications Staff Writer Rachel Hatch and Career Consultant Robyn Walter.

Before leaving for their weeklong trip to Morocco in June, the group met throughout the spring semester and explored topics of research in a seminar format. Readings and discussions about Morocco included areas such as women’s role in contemporary society, the nation’s environmental challenges, cultural influences of Spain, public higher education and economic relations between the European Union and North Africa.

When in Morocco, the group scheduled several days of talks at AUI, and also set out to experience the people and culture of Morocco, making trips to historic areas of several cities. The group dined with Professor Saloua Zerhouni, who has applied to become a Fulbright scholar at Illinois Wesleyan this fall. A political science professor at Morocco’s largest university, Université Mohammad V – Souissi in the capitol city of Rabat, Zerhouni arranged meetings for the Illinois Wesleyan group with faculty and administrators at Mohammad V.

“This is how we build international bridges,” said Nadeau, who came to Morocco to study the influence that Moroccan Amazigh (or Berber) tribes played on today’s Spanish cuisine.

Although she has studied extensively in Spain, Nadeau has never had the chance to cross the eight-mile stretch of water between Spain and Morocco. “I was able to walk through the markets, taste the food, talk with scholars about my research and visit with librarians at both the University of Fez and Al Akhawayn,” said Nadeau. “The physical connection to this part of history was overwhelming, in the good sense of the word.”

Jahiel, who has been actively involved in sustainability education, said she had a productive meeting with Professor of Environmental Science Bachir Raissouni, the Executive Director of the Centre for Environmental Issues and Regional Development (CEIRD) at Al Akhawayn University. “Through my meeting with Dr. Raissouni, I learned a great deal about Morocco’s institutional structure for addressing environmental issues, how it has developed over time, and how it has functioned in reality,” said Jahiel, who has done extensive study of these issues in China. Jahiel added that she and Raissouni are exploring the possibility of holding a sustainability workshop at Al Akhawayn similar to the one Jahiel coordinated at Illinois Wesleyan in 2006 and that Raissouni expressed interest in visiting Illinois Wesleyan.

Like Jahiel, other professors came away from Morocco forming collaborative relationships or additions to their research. Mendez-Carbajo, who will be the incoming chair of the Economics Department this fall, said he is looking into the possibility of creating a May Term course with a professor from AUI that would focus on money and banking issues in Islamic nations. A native of Spain, Mendez-Carbajo worked on the topic of North African-European Union relations while a graduate student in Madrid. Traveling to Morocco offered “a unique opportunity to revisit problems under a new light,” he said. “Morocco is, in so many ways, invisible even though it is so close to the country where I grew up.”

Ossella-Durbal, who teaches development economics at Illinois Wesleyan, said she is also looking into the possibility of developing a May Term course examining the economics of tourism, which could include lectures by professors at AUI and travel to Morocco. “I came on this trip because I wanted to learn, learn, learn, and I was not disappointed,” she said. “There is so much potential for new research for me in this area of the world.” According to Ossella-Durbal, all travel is educational. The daughter of an Italian employee of the United Nations, she grew up in developing countries across East Asia.

Drici and Shimizu met with officials at AUI and Mohammed V with the goal of not only determining areas of collaboration and exchange, but discovering avenues and formats to make the interactions possible,” in Drici’s words. “All the people we met at AUI and Mohammed V

expressed a strong interest in creating ongoing programs with Illinois Wesleyan,” said Drici, who was impressed by the collaborative projects and research evolving from the trip.

One of the goals of research is to share information with others – an idea embraced by Duke in her informational studies for The Ames Library. While in Morocco, Duke initiated a tour of the *Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc* in Rabat, or national library of Morocco, and spoke with AUI’s Vice President for Academic Affairs Abdelhamid Lotfi, who is the acting director of the library at Al Akhawayn. “What struck me was how similar the issues of information literacy are regardless of culture,” said Duke, who discussed with counterparts the need for students to “go beyond Google” in their research. “We are encouraging students to learn how to find and evaluate sources, and use them appropriately and ethically.” Duke said. AUI will be introducing the concept of information literacy across the curriculum, an area where Illinois Wesleyan has been focusing. “There will be many avenues for collaboration and learning in the future,” Duke said.

Career Consultant Robyn Walter provided insight on career development to officials at Mohammad V, and worked closely with her counterpart at AUI, Ikram Benseddik. “At AUI, Ikram is the only career services professional in the entire country,” said Walter. Morocco’s higher education system is working to adapt elements of what is called the “Anglo-Saxon” or “American” model of teaching, but the concept of career planning is new to the nation. **(link to the Insight story)**. “Quickly becoming Ikram’s only link to our shared profession, I was glad I could affirm a common richness and efforts in our work with students,” she said.

Drici said she believes the trip was a success, judging from the positive response the Illinois Wesleyan group received in Morocco from the universities. “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.