

Entrepreneurial Engagement

By: Adrian Garcia

When summer arrives in the U.S. and the temperature remains upward of 90 degrees a group of college students journey thousands of miles away to winter in South Africa. For over the last 15 years the students make the trip with the hope they will do more than escape the heat.

In August the 2012 student-participants of Entrepreneurship and Engagement in South Africa returned from their mild South African winter. The group spent six weeks working to improve the businesses of sixteen entrepreneurs in the Western Cape.

“Based on the other study abroad programs out there, EESA was the only study program that would have provided me an experiential learning opportunity to use my skillset in a new and dynamic environment,” said Suhail Shaikh, a participant in the program last summer.

Shaikh and the majority of students were from Oklahoma State University — the university the EESA program is housed under. Students from the University of Colorado, Texas A&M University, and Texas Christian University also enrolled in the program.

The U.S. students were not alone in their efforts to improve entrepreneurial businesses within the Western Cape. Seventeen students who attended the University of the Western Cape were also an essential part of making the program successful.

“Working with students from different cultures helped me to realize the importance of viewing a particular concept/idea through different perspectives,” Shaikh said. “Working with students from diverse background and diverse ethnicities from South Africa was a learning experience.”

After students like Shaikh were accepted for the program they were given an extensive amount of reading on the environment and history of South Africa. The legal segregation of blacks and whites known as Apartheid, which ended less than 20 years ago, was a major topic in the reading.



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Vendors in a township in the Western Cape of South Africa.

Understanding the conditions of a pre- and post-apartheid nation was essential to understanding the misdistribution of wealth, the nation's unemployment rate of 24.9 percent and the importance entrepreneurship plays within the country.

Chris Price participated in EESA during the summer of 2011, and a last year he returned to be one of two administrative coordinators.

“I feel like since apartheid, the black people of South Africa are just now starting to realize that they are capable of some amazing feats. Blacks in South Africa were never allowed to think for themselves and I think that mentality just became part of the culture over the years,” Price said.

“We are seeing a lot more creativity emerging because the cycle of complacency is starting to break,” he added.

Price and his colleague Darin Applegate organized the accepted students into teams of five to six consisting of a graduate student, undergraduates from different campuses, and students from the UWC.

“My own personal experience with working with the American students was very pleasant. Collectively we worked well. While we started as strangers on the 10th of June, I saw us become a family,” said Amaan Phiri, a student attending UWC.

Price and Applegate also organized the teams based on backgrounds and strengths. Although many students were pursuing an MBA, prospective majors varied from computer science, law and journalism.

After the teams were organized each learned about the two clients they would be working with for the six weeks. The sophistication of the clients ranged from simple vendors and hair dressers to accountants and business consultants.

“The toughest time for me was when we had to interview the potential clients that we would be working with. We interviewed around 50 entrepreneurs and had to choose 16,” Price said.

It was difficult for Price to see, “how bad these people want help and not being able to pick everyone. It was tough to know that the people that weren't chosen may not be in business anymore by the time we leave.”

The teams spent the first three weeks of the trip bridging culture gaps and learning their clients' businesses. Students were encouraged to become a part of the companies in order to get a better understanding. In order to do this the students



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Students participating in the 2012 Entrepreneurship and Engagement in South Africa program.

had to go into the townships where the businesses were located.

The townships in South Africa are much different than the tourist ready Cape Town the students visited on weekends. People live and work in tin shacks; they sell local produce and braai (barbecue) on the sidewalks.

Multiple times a week students enter this environment to gain an understanding of their clients' company. This understanding would cumulate into at minimum 40-page document analyzing the history, strengths and weaknesses of the business.

For the final three weeks the teams spent time producing deliverables — tangible products to improve the business. Deliverables included signage, useable bookkeeping systems, employee training manuals, business identity packages etc. Any deliverable given to the client had to be accepted and useable by the client by the time the students ended their engagement.

“I would say the hardest part of the program was understanding what the entrepreneur wanted and then showing them a way to find the solution on their own,” said Morgan Piper, one of the participants.

Piper went on to say, “I often felt like it would be so much easier to just tell them what they should change and then move on, but after completing the program I realized that they learned so much more, as did I, from that growing/learning process.”

The teams produced a variety of other deliverables. Then they packed their things, some went on to travel, eventually everyone returned home. Their clients are now thousands of miles away with deliverables to help them in their entrepreneurial attempt at success in South Africa.