

## Community Colleges Partner With Brazil

**P**UTTING U.S. COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS TOGETHER with students in Brazil was first a dream, and finally, a reality, for Mary Gershwin, president of U.S.-Brazil Connect, a nonprofit formed to strengthen ties and educational opportunities between the two countries.

“It’s important to start making new opportunities available,” she says. “That’s what we’re doing.”

And it’s worked very well in its first year, as colleges partnered with Brazil’s largest technical and vocational school network to provide English language instruction for Brazilian students and expanded cultural understanding and leadership skills for the U.S. students. Three community colleges joined the initial effort: Houston Community College (HCC) in Texas, Red Rocks Community College in Colorado (RRCC), and Jackson Community College (JCC) in Michigan.

Typically, partnerships take a long time to foster and develop. This one was unusually quick—one year from conception to inception—in part because Gershwin had already established relationships in Brazil. But, she admits, “It was intense.”

Each college pays a membership fee to U.S.-Brazil Connect. Each student pays a portion of his or her travel costs, ranging from \$500 to \$2,000, depending on how much the college contributes toward the airfare, insurance, and visa. Brazilian partners cover the costs of housing and meals, as well as a stipend of approximately \$600.

According to Gershwin, the goal of U.S.-Brazil Connect was to build an infrastructure to provide consistent support for the program. “Colleges want to establish an ongoing relationship with Brazil, but since nobody on the campus has that responsibility, it gets pushed to a back burner.”

### **An Opportunity to Expand Exchange in South America**

Red Rocks was interested in expanding its student exchanges in South America, particularly Brazil, according to Linda Yazdani, director of international programs. “This partnership was exactly what we were looking for.” Brazil is of interest to the colleges

because of its importance as a democratic nation, booming economy and middle class, and growth as a trade partner.

In June 2011 Gershwin spent a month in Brazil, meeting with embassy representatives and presenting ideas for the exchange to potential partners. With leadership from the National Confederation of Industry (CNI), Brazil’s national trade association for industry, the United States and Brazil partners agreed to focus on skills development through formation of the U.S.-Brazil Partnership for Skills.

CNI engaged two Brazilian organizations as partners, Social Service of Industry (SESI) and National Service for Industrial Apprenticeship (SENAI). SESI focuses on K–12 education and maintains a network of schools throughout the country. SENAI provides training in technical and professional programs. They both provided funds for the exchange program which, hopefully, will produce better-qualified and -educated students for the industrial sector.

The partner organizations took the lead for much of the development work. Once that was completed, the colleges began their recruitment efforts in the United States and Brazil launched its selection process.

Community colleges chose students using a common application, essays, recommendations, and interviews. Special attention was paid to those in the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields; about one-third represented those areas.

Students in the Brazilian schools are mostly lower income teens who attend private high school and technical schools for four years, free of charge, thanks to SESI and SENAI. These are demanding programs, specializing in areas such as robotics, automation, and logistics. The 200 students were selected for the program based on a test of their English skills.

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**Matheus Ribiero (in the sunglasses)** was a US-Brazil Connect Fellow from Houston Community College; here he is with other students and fellows.

### Some Challenges

As with most first-year programs, there were some blips, but generally it went smoothly. Flexibility and patience were required in this country where traffic jams cause delays. Sometimes classrooms were hard to find and were held in a gym, parking lot, or breezeway between two buildings. Classroom and technology supplies, such as markers or computers, were sometimes unavailable. But this is all getting resolved this year, as coordinators will be stationed in each school to deal with these, and other, problems.

Other improvements are being made in the United States. All participants attended a class at their college to prepare them for the venture. In Cohn's class this year he will include more ESL teaching strategies. He's also making the reading list more manageable to introduce students to the Brazilian culture and history.

On the Brazilian side, additional time will be spent on raising the English levels of its students so topics such as science and technology can be tackled. They will also identify 50 higher functioning students to tackle more advanced subjects. And 50 public school students will be included in the program as a trial this year.

### Return Visit

A group of 10 Brazilian students, selected for having made the most progress in their English fluency, had a special treat in October. They traveled to Colorado for two weeks where they met with their Red Rocks Community College friends, as well as two from Houston who came up for the reunion. The Brazilians stayed with families from a Denver international high school, shadowed the students, attended lectures, toured the college, and spent a weekend at a mountain ranch.

Monica Mariano, SENAI coordinator, recalls a statement by one of these students: "I feel like I'm in a movie, like I'm in a dream."

### Off They Go

In June 2012, 15 community college students, five student interns, three faculty members, and Gershwin took off for Salvador, Brazil. They worked with the high school students every afternoon for four weeks. Faculty members provided oversight as well as training for the U.S. students. An English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher from RRCC helped develop the curriculum and led activities on how to interact with the Brazilian students.

But this was not just a four-week experience. It actually began several months earlier, when students in both countries used Facebook to get to know each other. They posted pictures and videos, and engaged in conversations that made the eventual face-to-face meetings much smoother. Other media, such as Skype and Google, were also used.

In addition, students from the three community colleges communicated with

each other, via social media, prior to the trip.

"Although we had assigned a group of 10 Brazilians to each American for the Facebook venture, we had planned to mix up the groups when they arrived," Gershwin says. "But the students revolted and told us they wanted to remain in their groups. So we agreed."

The reception for the U.S. participants was unexpected. Mort Cohn, JCC adjunct instructor and lead faculty member, recalls a comment made by one of the coaches alluding to the fact that they were "greeted like rock stars when they arrived in Brazil."

Although the Brazilians were reluctant to speak to the U.S. students at first because they were not confident in their English skills, that changed quickly as they worked with their U.S. coaches.

The Brazilian students were "motivated and wanted to be there," says Cohn "They are the 'self-described nerds' of Brazil, preparing for STEM careers."

## Expectations Met—and More

On both sides, students came away from the experience with new friends, new confidence, and new skills. Academically, the Brazilians fared well: one third achieved English fluency, enabling them to express themselves in another language. The dropout rate was minimal, with only six leaving the program.

The Brazilians enjoyed hanging out with their new friends, playing games, and practicing their English to such an extent they often they had to be reminded to go home in the evening.

Cohn was “blown away” by the program. “I never walked into a classroom where so much happened in such a short period of time. I couldn’t wait to get back to the classroom every day.”

According to Gigi Do, executive director of the HCC Office of International Initiatives, “Our returning students spoke of instilling lifelong friendships with Brazilian students and fond memories of their time spent tutoring English to these students.”

Nick Fox, a former HCC student now at Texas A&M University, says, “I realized how much this program meant to the students. They were very motivated and worked hard.” He says the exchange also increased his leadership skills and confidence, and gave him a better understanding of another culture.

But this partnership is more than that. Community college students are often left out of international experiences four-year college students have, such as education abroad and student exchanges. “But they have the same

**“Community college students are entering an increasingly internationally focused workforce. They are at a disadvantage if they have no global experience.”**

needs to deal with a global economy and a shrinking world,” Gershwin says.

Yazdani agrees: “Community college students are entering an increasingly internationally focused workforce. They are at a disadvantage if they have no global experience.

“Our students learned to get past their cultural fears, lead activities, and go beyond what they were comfortable doing,” she adds.

According to Cohn, this kind of international program helps with recruitment for the college. But mostly, it “establishes relationships, helps students in the workplace, and ultimately might help the country if we have more people who are culturally sensitive to the rest of the world.”

For the Brazilian teens, this is a huge opportunity, according to Mariano. It helps them improve their English by speaking in that language every day with native speakers. In school, the emphasis tends to be on reading and writing. English is vitally important for these youngsters who likely will be going into industry. The machines, manuals, and guides are all written in English, and many of the managers speak in English.

Equally as important, she says, is the pride that comes from being able to do something hard, and a new belief in oneself.

Matheus Ribiero had tried to learn English by himself, but this 18-year-old found talking with his coaches and others a much better way to do it. “The program helped me make new friends, improved my English tremendously, and helped me discover what I want to do in life.” After Ribiero completes his high school degree and technical diploma, he plans to attend the university to study international relations and eventually become a diplomat.

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## Continuing Relationships

One of the requirements for students at JCC was to submit essays on their experience upon returning to Michigan. What actually happened was that students from the other colleges, as well as from U.S.-Brazil Connect, also submitted thoughtful reflections on their experience. These 4- to 40-page essays, together with watercolor illustrations by one student, will be put together in a 250-page book by Cohn to record the incredible experience.

Two-way communication continues to thrive between the Brazilians and the Americans, and promises to continue for many years. Through the use of social media, they are continuing to share experiences and feelings with their newfound friends.

## A Growing Program With Worldwide Potential

In 2013 the program is slated to grow from 24 to 70 U.S. students and faculty hooking up with 700 Brazilian students in six Brazilian states. Another community college, Flathead in Montana, has joined this year. Gershwin says the program has the potential to ultimately affect thousands of students both here and abroad.

JCC expects to increase its participants from 5 to 12 or 13, and continue adding more each year, while maintaining the quality of the participants.

RRCC is using the Brazil project as a model for other education abroad programs. It hopes to send 12 students this next year and provide some scholarship opportunities. They are integrating the program as an actual course in the college.

"I have a new found faith in young students," Cohn says. "They want to make a difference in the world. This is potentially world changing for both countries. It fosters lifelong relationships in an international community."

"The most beautiful thing about the project," Mariano says, "is that it helps kids with few choices. We're trying to change their future, to help them grow and have a good job." **IE**

**MARIAN KISCH** is a freelance writer in Chevy Chase, Maryland. Her last article for *IE* was "Recruiting International Students—Community College Style" in the July/August 2012 issue.



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