PAVING THE WAY TO STUDY ABROAD IN TAIWAN

Maggie Blair-Ramsay at the National Palace Museum.
The College of Engineering has been working for several years through the Chicago-based Taiwanese Ministry of Education’s Taipei Economic and Cultural Office to facilitate a study abroad exchange program with National Taiwan University (NTU) in Taipei, which is considered the top engineering school in Taiwan. NTU has already been sending students to us for five years.

As a result of the relationship with NTU, the Taiwanese Ministry of Education offered Maggie Blair-Ramsey, MSU’s engineering study abroad coordinator, the opportunity to participate in an “academic” tour of Taiwan as a guest of the Taiwanese Ministry of Education. After Blair-Ramsey had accepted the invitation, two additional top engineering schools—National Tsing Hua University and National Chiao Tung University, both in the city of Hsinchu—invited her to visit them as part of her August 2006 tour. She is now working to establish exchange programs with them as well.

Professor Lalita Udpa is the faculty leader of the National Taiwan University program for the College of Engineering. Colleges at MSU can begin sending students to a school in another country only after a thorough approval process. In this case, the College of Engineering takes the initial steps, then the MSU International Studies Programs (ISP) academic committee gives final approval.

“The visit to National Taiwan University confirmed what we already believed—that this will be a good relationship for us,” Blair-Ramsey says. They teach classes in both Mandarin Chinese and English. The NTU exchange program just recently received official approval from the International Studies Program, so we will be sending at least one student there as soon as summer 2007.” (Summer exchange students carry out research with professors, since most summer classes are taught in Mandarin.)

“Taiwan is a beautiful place,” Blair-Ramsey says, “very mountainous, with many small islands around a large main island.” Taipei, at the north end of the main island, is the largest city. She describes it as “busy and crowded like New York.” In addition to its cities, Taiwan has national parks and botanical gardens, along with rural areas where people farm. “I feel privileged to be able to visit other countries and see the wonderful sights,” she says, “but above all, the travel allows me to come back home and build a program for our students. There’s no way we should or would send students to an unknown area. We have to consider safety factors and what type of housing they would live in. We must have face-to-face contact with people whom we hold accountable for our students’ welfare. For instance, I found that the educational buildings in Taiwan were pleasantly air conditioned, but it was smoldering hot in the student housing I visited, which makes me think it will be best to send our students there in the fall or spring.”

Blair-Ramsey’s tour group of 14 people from universities all over the world—Australia, Canada, Germany, Malaysia, mainland China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, and the United States—visited all kinds of schools, not just engineering, with sightseeing excursions along the way. She spent her final two days in Taiwan visiting the three engineering schools. “They were very serious about explaining their research to me in each lab. It was impressive, but challenging to take it all in!” she says.

“They’re doing some really important work. They are big on nanotechnology. Some of our departments are looking into doing collaborative research with Tsing Hua and Chiao Tung Universities. Their students will come here as soon as we can set up a program. And we’ll start sending students to them.”

Taiwan has a number of advantages for American students. Blair-Ramsey estimates that as many as 90 percent of Taiwanese professors have been educated in the United States, so they are fluent in English and familiar with Western customs. She says, “I was approached by many professors as I visited the engineering schools. They said, ‘I got my education at MSU [or U of M or some other school in the United States].’ Most people in the university settings speak English as a second language. So that makes it easy and comfortable for our students to find their way around and to function.”

—Evan Anderson