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From the left: Dr. Michael Vrooman, Ms. Giovannina Howden, Dr. Deepak Prem Subramony, Dr. Ashley Rosener, Ms. Cheryl Jones, Dr. Jay Cooper, Ms. Brianne Perez, Ms. Rebecca Hambleton, Dr. Peter Zhang. Photography by Dr. Deepak Prem Subramony

Two COE Faculty Visit Partner Institution in Mexico

By Dr. Deepak Prem Subramony, GVSU Faculty

During the 50th Anniversary year of the Grand Valley State University College of Education, the Partnership delegation Committee of the University's Barbara H. Padnos International Center selected two College of Education faculty members—the largest contingent from any single College—to participate in the 2014 GVSU International Partnership delegation to our partner institution in Mexico, the prestigious Universidad de las Américas Puebla (UDLAP) located in the historic Mexican city of Cholula. The two participants—Dr. Deepak Prem Subramony (Associate Professor—Educational Technology in the Department of Special Education, Foundations and Technology) and Dr. Jay Cooper (Associate Professor—College Student Affairs Leadership in the Department of Leadership and

Learning) represented the College of Education in this delegation, which visited the UDLAP campus and the cities of Cholula, Puebla, and Mexico City from March 2nd through 8th, 2014. Dr. Subramony's participation was funded via a GVSU International Partnership delegation Grant, while Dr. Cooper obtained his funding via a GVSU International Partnership Sustenance Grant.

The delegation—ably and expertly co-led by Dr. Michael Vrooman (Associate Professor—Spanish in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures) and Ms. Rebecca Hambleton (the Padnos International Center's Director of Study Abroad and International Partnerships)—also included the following participants from outside the College of Education: Ms. Cheryl Jones (Office



Mexico City, by kconnors of Morguefile

Coordinator—Human Resources), Dr. Ashley Rosener (Liaison Librarian—Professional Programs at the Steelcase Library), Ms. Brianne Perez (Academic Advisor—College of Health Professions), and Dr. Peter Zhang (Associate Professor—Communication Studies in the School of Communications). The Padnos International Center provided the bulk of the financial support involved in the delegates' participation in this visit, including mandatory pre-departure information and orientation sessions, international flights to and from Mexico, most in-country travel expenses, housing accommodations, several meals, and international travel insurance, adding up to an expense of approximately US \$2,800 per person. Delegates were expected to be full participants in the delegation and travel with the group, all the while doing their best to represent the University and their respective units in a positive and professional manner.

Day 1:

Sunday, March 2nd dawned a typical cold, cloudy, late-winter day in West Michigan as the delegation departed from Grand Rapids, arriving on schedule in warm, sunny Mexico City in the afternoon. After clearing Mexican

immigration and customs, the group boarded a modern, comfortable 'Estrella Roja' bus that whisked passengers directly from Terminal 2 of Mexico City's Benito Juárez International Airport to the long-distance bus terminal in Puebla—a scenic, two-and-a-half hour journey traversing a high mountain pass with spectacular views of the twin volcanoes of Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl. Upon arriving in Puebla, the group was warmly received and welcomed by Ms. Giovannina Howden (Head of Student Mobility at UDLAP's Directorate General for Research, Graduate Studies and Internationalization), who accompanied the delegates to their hotel in Cholula, where the smoking Popocatepetl volcano was framed by a spectacular orange-red sunset as check-in formalities were completed. The delegates spent the evening taking a walk into Cholula's historic central plaza and enjoying an authentic Mexican dinner featuring exotic delicacies such as *huitlacoche* (black corn truffles) and fresh, handmade corn tortillas.

Day 2:

The work week started Monday, March 3rd with a visit to the beautifully constructed and landscaped campus of UDLAP. The visit began with a formal breakfast meeting and

“Several commonalties between the UDLAP campus and GVSU’s Allendale campus were immediately apparent, including the generous sense of space fostered by the un-crowded arrangement of buildings interspersed with airy, open lawns and plazas,... and the happy, smiling faces of students, staff and faculty.”

photo session with UDLAP’s senior administration, held at the 18th-century Hacienda de Santa Catarina Mártir—the most historic, legendary and emblematic building on campus that currently serves as UDLAP’s Rectory. Following this meeting, Ms. Howden and other staff members from UDLAP’s international office spent a tremendous amount of time, energy and enthusiasm giving the visiting delegates a grand tour of the sprawling, art-filled UDLAP campus. Several commonalities between the UDLAP campus and GVSU’s Allendale campus were immediately apparent, including the generous sense of space fostered by the un-crowded arrangement of buildings interspersed with airy, open lawns and plazas, the impressive edifices constructed with an excellent sense of design and high-end materials, the abundance of trees, flowers and expertly-managed natural areas, the extraordinary amount and quality of artworks large and small, and the happy, smiling faces of students, staff and faculty.

Apart from its “sight-seeing” value, the tour also served the purpose of orienting the delegates to the layout of the UDLAP campus and the locations of the various academic departments and administrative units, so that delegates could make their way to their professional meetings across campus the following day. The tour ended at UDLAP’s main student dining facility, where delegates had the opportunity to rub shoulders with UDLAP students and get a taste of UDLAP campus life. It became abundantly clear to the delegates after dining at this facility a couple times that UDLAP adheres to extremely high standards of quality and performance when it comes to feeding its students. Every item of food offered to students was prepared healthfully, with organic or natural ingredients and a minimum of salt, sugar and grease. Delegates marveled at how every bite was full of flavor and freshness. Following lunch, the delegates were treated to an extremely interesting and enlightening presentation and Q&A session on Mexican history, culture and society—with special focus

on Puebla state, were UDLAP and the city of Cholula are located—by UDLAP cultural anthropology faculty Dr. Alison Elizabeth Lee.

Day 3:

Tuesday, March 4th was the day when individual delegates got the valuable opportunity to meet with their respective counterparts across various departments and units at UDLAP. Dr. Subramony and Dr. Cooper enjoyed a very rewarding and productive meeting with faculty members from UDLAP’s Department of Education, including Educational Technology faculty Dr. Laura Helena Porras Hernández and Dr. Bertha Salinas Amescua. The UDLAP faculty members provided the visitors with a

highly informative overview of their fascinating, path-breaking undergraduate degree program in Educational Innovation. As Dr. Subramony marveled, “If I had the opportunity to design, develop and implement my dream undergraduate program, it would most likely look exactly like this one!” The two sets of colleagues also shared copies of their recent scholarly publications with each other, discussed current trends in the field, and made plans for

future collaboration in the areas of teaching and research.

Following the meeting with Department of Education faculty, Dr. Subramony proceeded to the office housing UDLAP’s highly respected Programa de Liderazgo para Jóvenes Indígenas (Indigenous Youth Leadership Program, website: <http://www.udlap.mx/liderazgo/Default.aspx>) to meet with its Coordinator of Planning and Logistics Mr. Jesús Roberto Vega Macip, who enthusiastically presented him with the details regarding the program. Unfortunately due to the tight scheduling of his visit Dr. Subramony was unable to meet in person with the Program’s Academic Coordinator Dr. Laura Elena Romero López, however the two faculty successfully connected via e-mail following Dr. Subramony’s return to Michigan. Since then Dr. Subramony presented a guest lecture on

“If I had the opportunity to design, develop and implement my dream undergraduate program, it would most likely look exactly like this one!”



GVSU Delegates enjoying a historic mural at the Castillo de Chapultepec in Mexico City. Photography by Dr. Deepak Prem Subramony

the ‘Socio-Cultural Impact of Educational Technology on Minority and Indigenous Learners’ at the 2014 Program, and the two faculty members are currently working on a collaborative scholarly presentation and publication project.

Day 4:

Wednesday, March 5th was devoted to exploring the unparalleled cultural and historic sites spread across the Cholula-Puebla area. The bright, sunny, perfect 75-degree day began with a visit to the stupendous Great Pyramid of Cholula, the largest known pyramid on planet earth. Delegates had the opportunity to walk through a network of archeological tunnels burrowing under the pyramid, followed by a hike to its summit to visit the beautiful pink church—La Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios—built atop it by Spanish conquistadors, as well as to enjoy the panoramic views of historic downtown Cholula, the smoke-belching Popocatepetl volcano, and the surrounding countryside. Following this, the group headed out to visit the jewel-like churches of San Francisco Acatepec and Santa María Tonantzintla—both textbook examples of the Indigenous Baroque style—before ending up in the

UNESCO World Heritage-listed colonial center of Puebla. The delegates enjoyed a delicious sampling of traditional Puebla “mole” sauces at the award-winning ‘El Mural de los Poblanos’ restaurant, followed by a walking tour of the historic district to view architectural gems such as the jaw-dropping Capilla del Rosario—one of the finest examples of New World Baroque anywhere—as well as dozens of palaces, stately homes and churches all beautifully adorned with colorful, locally-crafted Talavera tile-work.

Day 5:

On Thursday, March 6th, the delegates reluctantly bid goodbye to Cholula and the UDLAP campus—and all the new friends they had made there—and were escorted in a comfortable UDLAP van by an impeccably charming and hospitable graduate assistant to Mexico City, the nation’s exhilarating capital and second-largest city in the world after Greater Tokyo, Japan. Upon arriving in the megalopolis the group headed straight to the Castillo de Chapultepec—former residence of Mexican royalty and Presidents—to view its celebrated murals and history-filled rooms, and to take in the commanding vista over the city from its hilltop perch. After touring the castle the delegates

headed to lunch at the famous ‘El Cardenal’ restaurant, known for its authentic and faithful renditions of classic Mexican dishes. Following lunch, the group completed check-in formalities at their hotel and spent the rest of the afternoon and evening enjoying an exhaustive walking tour of Mexico City’s UNESCO World Heritage-listed historic center, home to architectural masterpieces such as the Zócalo plaza (one of the largest city squares in the world), the cavernous Catedral Metropolitana de la Asunción de María with its Churrigueresque (Spanish Baroque) facades, the majestic Palacio Nacional (office of the President), the ruins of the Aztec Templo Mayor, the Palacio de Bellas Artes (displaying a superb blend of Art Nouveau and Art Deco styles), the Neo-Renaissance Palacio Postal, and the photogenic Casa de los Azulejos.

Day 6:

On Friday, March 7th the delegates started their last full day in Mexico with a very important appointment—a meeting with the staff members at the Benjamin Franklin Library, established in 1942 to promote friendship and understanding between Mexico and the United States. Discussions at the meeting touched upon a wide range of topics, including Fulbright grant opportunities for US and Mexican faculty, staff and students. Ms. Howden arrived from UDLAP to participate in these discussions as well. The meeting was followed by lunch at a restaurant specializing in authentic cuisine from the Mexican state of Oaxaca, after which Ms. Howden accompanied the delegates to the world-renowned Museo Nacional de Antropología—Mexico’s most visited museum and home to monumental pre-Columbian masterpieces including the celebrated Aztec Sun Stone. At the conclusion of the museum visit the delegates bid a tearful goodbye to Ms. Howden—who had won the entire group’s hearts with her extraordinary professionalism, hospitality and personal warmth—and headed back to the hotel. Later that after-

noon and evening, the delegates continued with exploring the virtually unlimited sights offered by this encyclopedia of a city, where even a whole month is not enough to explore its countless museums and monuments. Some were even able to summon up the energy to enjoy an electrifying late evening of authentic Mariachi music at the festive Plaza Garibaldi.



Day 7:

On Saturday, March 8th, the delegates got up bright and early in order to head back to the airport to catch their return flight to Grand Rapids. UDLAP once again provided the group with a van and driver who delivered them efficiently and painlessly to Benito Juárez International Airport’s Terminal 2. The group caught one last, breathtaking glimpse of the rising sun painting the skies orange and red behind the photogenic silhouettes of the

Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl volcanoes as our Boeing 737-800 aircraft took off and pointed its nose northwards.

In subsequent conversations with each other, the participants of this International Partnership delegation visit to UDLAP and Mexico have repeatedly emphasized how personally enriching and life-changing this experience has been. They have succeeded in making professional and personal contacts with counterparts at UDLAP—and with each other—that have the potential to last a lifetime. This author would like to offer his kudos to Dr. Mark Schaub and Ms. Rebecca Hambleton of GVSU’s Padnos International Center for conceptualizing and running this extremely important and valuable program; he would also like to recognize Ms. Hambleton and Dr. Michael Vrooman for coordinating and leading the trip so flawlessly, from pre-departure orientations to post-trip follow-ups; and finally, he would like to acknowledge every single participant in this delegation for being such wonderful travel companions, colleagues, and friends. Thank you all, so very much!