Faculty Report

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Faculty/Rank: Associate Professor

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College: Arts & Letters

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Proposal title: Student and Faculty Exchange Program with the University of Zurich, Department of Geography

Country/ies visited: Switzerland

Institution visited: University of Zurich

Dates of travel: 12/17/2008 – 01/07/2009

Number of student participants: none at this trip

Previous IP proposals submitted and grants awarded: none

Have all required reports been submitted? n/a

Other funding for this activity available/applied for: none

Proposal Abstract (75 word maximum):

The purpose of this trip was to develop an exchange program between the Departments of Geography at SDSU and the University of Zurich, Switzerland. This program will build on extensive existing contacts between the applicant and the partner institute in Zurich. Its intent is to formalize the already fruitful relationship, allowing students and faculty to study and work at the respective partner institution on a regular, ongoing basis.
Travel report:

I. Opening/overview of intentions/activity

The main purpose of this trip was to develop the principles and framework of an exchange agreement between the Departments of Geography at San Diego State University and the University of Zurich (UZH), Switzerland. SDSU Geography faculty have long-standing relationships with several UZH faculty, including Professors Sara Fabrikant and Robert Weibel. Professor Fabrikant, the main contact within UZH Geography, was previously a faculty member at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and is intimately familiar with both the U.S. and Swiss academic system. She is eager to be involved in an exchange program with SDSU, enabling students and faculty to spend extended periods of time at the partner institute.

II. In preparation for the trip abroad

Preparations for the trip included numerous previous contacts with the partner institution, including extensive research collaboration with Dr. Fabrikant. This included self-funded trips to either institution that were focused on specific research projects. During the summer of 2007, Dr. Skupin spent several weeks at the Geography Department in Zurich, including giving a presentation in its colloquium series and having extensive contact with UZH students, confirming their great interest in SDSU. In return, Professor Fabrikant spent a month during the summer of 2008 here at SDSU on a collaborative research and publication project and in connection with that was offered an appointment as adjunct faculty member by the Dean of the College of Arts and Letters.

A large impetus for the development of a more formal exchange program was the already existing level of interest among students of the two institutions. For the 2008/09 academic year, an SDSU Master’s student managed to receive a two-semester Fulbright scholarship to study and perform research at the University of Zurich, where he is now working closely with Professor Fabrikant’s research group. In the spring of 2009, a self-funded Master’s student from Zurich spent almost a whole semester here at SDSU working on his research and attending a graduate seminar. He returned to Zurich in late-April 2009 to finish up his thesis.

Prior to this trip to Zurich, Dr. Skupin set up – via Dr. Fabrikant – a meeting with officials from the University of Zurich’s International Relations Office (details below). Preparations for the trip included gathering information about the general position of the partner institution within European academia. Some recent studies placed the University of Zurich at rank 14 in Europe and rank 45 worldwide. Its Geography Department is itself extremely highly regarded as well and is the largest Department of its kind in Switzerland. Preparations also included some discussion regarding the advantages of developing this particular program in order to build a network of exchanges, in the light of already existing exchanges at SDSU and UZH.
III. Upon arrival/specific activity

Prior to the trip, a meeting had been arranged with officials from the University of Zurich’s International Relations Office. Specifically, Dr. Skupin and Dr. Fabrikant met with the Head of International Relations, Dr. Yasmine Inauen, and the Deputy Head, Dr. Chantal Vögeli. The meeting included Dr. Fabrikant and Dr. Skupin presenting the history of their research collaboration, the current state of the exchange (see above), and the desired goals of this exchange.

The nature of the proposed exchange program was discussed at some length, such as the role of faculty in serving as research facilitators for students. The level of exchange between SDSU and UZH already existing was identified as a particularly positive omen for a more formalized program. Most importantly, UZH officials indicated their strong support of this activity. They are eager to begin the process of working with the SDSU Office of International Programs in setting up respective documents. With regards to the overall principles followed by this exchange program, it was agreed that SDSU’s existing agreement with the Department of Geoinformatics at the University of Münster may be a good example to follow.

Later during this visit, I also collected a number of printed materials related to the Department of Geography at UZH, including a 100+ page annual report (in English), which contains a comprehensive description of the Department’s structure and its research and education activities. Since my return from Zurich, the latest annual report has become online as well: http://www.geo.uzh.ch/fileadmin/files/content/studium/All_Downloads/jb_GIＵZ_08.web.pdf

Other materials available now at SDSU (in German) include information about the Bachelor- and Master-level programs in Geography and university-wide course catalogues for the Spring 2008 and Fall 2008 semesters.

IV. Conclusion, recommendation, and next step?

- Why is this particular institution valuable for SDSU?

Apart from the University of Zurich’s overall high ranking among worldwide universities, its Department of Geography is itself extremely highly regarded as well and is the largest Department of its kind in Switzerland. It covers a broad range of topical areas within the geographic discipline that is congruent with the strengths of our Department here at SDSU. Within the Department in Zurich, there are several divisions headed by the equivalent of Full and Associate Professors, including physical geography, human geography, political geography, economic geography, remote sensing, geographic information systems (GIS), and geographic information visualization & analysis (GIVA). The latter division is headed by Professor Fabrikant, our main contact for the exchange program. In addition, much of the teaching and research at UZH is highly complementary to SDSU, such as the cognitive focus of their visualization efforts that complements the computationally centered work at SDSU.
Sustainability of project (is there a high likelihood that students in the department will be interested in studying the proposed subject area at the prospective partner university and vice versa)?

A more formal exchange agreement will build seamlessly on the level of exchange already occurring, including collaborative research of faculty at both institutions and students that are currently participating. For example, Dr. Skupin is serving as committee member of a UZH Master’s student, while an SDSU Master’s student is currently performing research as a Fulbright exchange scholar in Zurich. Interest from students on both sides seems strong.

One key element ensuring successful individual exchanges as well as overall sustainability is the focus of this exchange on the two Departments of Geography, which have well-fitting curricula. There will be – at least for the first couple of years – a pronounced focus on research-centered involvement of students. Students having an interest in spending one or two semesters at the partner institution will be matched up with specific faculty members based on topical fit and specific faculty interest. Faculty participation on graduate thesis committees are among the tools to ensure close interaction with students.

The good topical match between the two Departments also makes faculty exchanges possible. For example, SDSU and UZH may in the future be able to switch places for a semester, to teach and perform research at the other institution. Faculty exchanges are a key element of the proposed agreement, again building on already existing contacts.

How will this exchange program (or expansion) increase participation by students in international activities, or enhance international learning environments for students?

One of the main challenges of exchanges with non-English speaking countries are students’ foreign-language capabilities. German is certainly not a language most prospective SDSU students will be familiar with. That could be a major impediment to student’s satisfaction and success. However, the nature of this exchange will greatly alleviate this problem, thereby making it attractive to a larger number of qualified SDSU students. One factor is that faculty, postdoctoral researchers, and students at the partner institution frequently converse in English even in everyday activities. The pronounced difference between Swiss German and High German plays some role in this as well. Note that some graduate courses are already held in English. Another factor is the research orientation of the program, where students will be engaged in research at either institution in close cooperation with specific faculty. That lends itself to use of English for communication. A very recent development is the founding of the Zurich Graduate School in Geography, which opens further opportunities for SDSU students (http://www.geo.uzh.ch/en/graduate-school/). With the language barrier thus much less of a problem, SDSU students will be able to ease into their experience at UZH. Zurich is also extremely conveniently located within Europe, with Germany, Austria, Italy, and France nearby.
What students will benefit?
Advanced Master’s and PhD students are the main candidates at the early stage of the program. SDSU students will uniquely benefit from spending extended periods at UZH. Zurich itself will be an extremely attractive destination for SDSU students and faculty, especially those specializing in GIScience, as some of the leading computing technology companies have a home in the city. For example, Google’s Zurich office is responsible for most of the company’s research and development of Google Maps. Particular benefits derive will derive from how the SDSU-UZH exchange will fit with existing exchanges, such as those involving the University of Münster at both SDSU and UZH. When one further considers the already existing level of research collaboration, SDSU students will have an opportunity to actively participate in cutting-edge research at an international level. Note that the topical coverage of our proposed exchange program will encompass a much larger portion of the geographic knowledge domain than just geographic information science, including physical and human geography.

What will be their activities (e.g. course work, international internships, field research, etc.)?
The main goal – at least in the early stages of this exchange – is to have students actively engaged in research activities rather than being solely focused on course work. The topic of such activities may involve the students’ own thesis research as well as research projects that the host faculty is engaged in. Host faculty will regularly meet with the students and will coordinate their involvement in research projects. Conversely, as part of the faculty exchange portion of this program, visiting faculty will be working with graduate students at the host institution.

What will be your role in promoting and supporting these activities?
Dr. Skupin will be the main faculty contact for SDSU students interested in this exchange program, while Dr. Fabrikant will be the counterpart at the University of Zurich. Apart from letting students know about the exchange program, we intend to ensure that interested students are matched up with interested faculty based on topical fit. To that end, we will also keep the faculty of the two Departments of Geography informed about the status, development, and opportunities of the exchange program.

V. Additional Information

All information should be sent to The Office of International Programs via e mail:

oip@mail.sdsu.edu