Students, Faculty Benefit from Research Trip to Puerto Rico

Five faculty representatives and nine graduate students from The University of Southern Mississippi recently completed a research trip to Puerto Rico that included exploration of workforce re-skilling, entrepreneurship and transportation.

The Southern Miss contingent, which was divided into three teams, met with more than 50 organizations during the 10-day trip (May 16-26) to carefully study how the island conducts economic and workforce development.

“At one of the freight companies we visited, we got the opportunity to tour a vessel container ship during our visit,” said Jackson, Miss., native Tyler Moore, who is pursuing a master’s degree in economic development. “This was one of the most exciting company visits we experienced while we were there, especially as students. The thing that I gained most was general knowledge of the ports and how port operations work in Puerto Rico.”

Puerto Rico is a self-governing, unincorporated territory of the United States, located in the Caribbean. The island’s population (3.6 million) is comparable to Mississippi (2.9 million) but its per-capita income is about one half that of Mississippi. Major industries include tourism and pharmaceuticals, the latter enhanced by substantial economic development incentives.

Dr. Chad Miller and Dr. Brian Richard led the Southern Miss logistics, trade and transportation team that investigated how the island freight infrastructure was shaped by economic development concerns. In particular, the team compared the megaport project in Gulfport, the “Port of the Future,” to the megaport project in Ponce, “Port of the Americas.” The team, which also included students Moore, Hana Prudilova and Matt McWhorter, met with importers/exporters, shipping lines, freight forwarders as well as port and government officials.

The entrepreneurship team, led by Dr. Brent Hales, compared entrepreneurship assistance in Mississippi to Puerto Rico. The group, which included students James Wilcox and John Scott, met with numerous entrepreneurs, small business assistance providers and other scholarly researchers. Their research revealed many of the same problems faced by small businesses in Mississippi – access to capital, lack of integrated government services and cultural bias against risk taking – were prevalent in Puerto Rico.

The Southern Miss Human Capital Development doctoral program, under the leadership of Dr. Cyndi Gaudet and Dr. Heather Annulis, also organized a team to examine how Puerto Rico is retraining its workforce to meet the demand for global competition. The team, which also included students Dionne Davis, Mamiie Griffin, Cheryl Kirby and Ty McClearley, met with official representatives of the governor’s office and key agencies, trade and industry associations, workforce development organizations and private business and industry leaders. The team discovered that a highly skilled workforce exists in Puerto Rico and that layoffs in the pharmaceutical industry present many opportunities for re-skilling.

Miller said the trip enabled graduate students to get a first-hand look and become directly connected to many of the areas covered during their degree pursuit.

“This was a great opportunity for students to apply what we learned in the classroom,” said Miller. “For example, port and shipping people tend to use a lot of technical terms such as T’EU, which stands for 20-foot equivalent unit, and drayage and our students were familiar with these terms from their coursework.”

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