

A WORLD-WIDE Connection

By Shawnda Schelinder
Photos by Brian Carlson

IN A TINY CLASSROOM IN ONE OF THE POOREST DISTRICTS IN QUETZALTENANGO, GUATEMALA, DOZENS OF STUDENTS GATHERED AROUND 12 LAPTOP COMPUTERS WHILE RAIN THUNDERED ON THE SCHOOL'S METAL ROOF.

Despite the rat-a-tat from above, an excitement buzzed throughout the classroom. For many of the students, it was the first time they had negotiated a touchpad mouse on a laptop, created art with Photoshop or made connections through Facebook. That's what happens when service learning meets international education.

As part of Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College's first international service learning project, five informational technology-network specialist students and two staff members traveled to Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, where they repaired and configured the school's computers, configured donated laptops and taught computer and software skills to the students and staff. The project was in cooperation with IRFE Volunteers Abroad, and the group received two grants to help fund the project.

The five young men – Brian Carlson, Carl Haughn, Jacob Koval, Dan Nourse and Dan Schmidt – left the day after graduation and gained valuable experience found only

through real world, hands-on experience.

"There were a lot of different things the students had to prepare for, and not just the language barrier," says Paul Gordon, the ITNS instructor at WITC-Ashland who accompanied the students on the trip. "They had to use a lot of critical thinking skills when they were planning what to bring and what kind of problems they would face."

Of the 15 computers the school owned, only 10 were operable. Gordon and fellow instructor Pat McCullough allowed the students to take the lead in deciding what equipment to take, from power supplies to hard drives. The students found they had to think quickly on their feet and come up with creative solutions when the necessary tools were not available to them at the school.

"It was a wonderful experience to get hands-on experience in the field and make a sustainable difference," Schmidt says.

Indeed, the group made a difference. Before their arrival, the 70 elementary, middle and high school students of the school had to vie for time on the 10 operable computers the school owned. The WITC students were able to repair and upgrade all but one of the school's

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computers, and they provided 12 donated laptops to the school as well.

"The trip was amazing – getting to work in a new country with new challenges and experiences," says Koval. "Helping people getting on their feet technologically was very rewarding."

WITC has committed to providing diverse education opportunities to its students. In addition to international service learning projects, WITC will continue to offer short-term immersion projects, semester abroad learning experiences and course curricular international projects.

"One of the biggest benefits of international travel and cultural experiences is that our students are exposed to other cultures. Our advisory board members are asking WITC to ensure students get a more global education as many of our area business are involved in international business or have a global footprint," says Frank Braswell, WITC's director of international education. "Offering

these opportunities to our students helps them become more competitive in the workforce by demonstrating knowledge of other cultures outside of our local borders."

Because business is increasingly a global economy, learning to work in diverse cultures is important. International education cultural experience projects prepare students for the global workplace in a way that classrooms simply cannot.

"International education and experiences are an investment, which combined with the technical training our students receive at WITC, prepare them for the global workforce," Braswell says. "Many of our students have not traveled outside of Wisconsin and this is an opportunity to help them develop

relationships with individuals from other countries and the self-confidence needed to address global questions during a job interview."

This spring, WITC's early childhood education students will complete studies abroad in Scotland. Faculty are also engaging in a cultural exchange program, with several professors visiting WITC from the Netherlands this year, and the WITC instructors traveling to Norway next year.

Visit the WITC Cultural Exchange Program page on Facebook for additional information about the trip. ■



WITC INFORMATIONAL
TECHNOLOGY
STUDENTS TRAVEL
TO GUATEMALA