

The Fulbright Experience -- Education Without Borders

In 2000, the Fulbright Program, which is sponsored by the US Department of State, created the Fulbright Senior Specialists Program to complement the traditional Fulbright Scholar Program, which is considered to be America's flagship international exchange activity. This year, according to the Fulbright Commission; see: <http://www.cies.org>, there will be over 400 US faculty and professionals who will travel abroad through the Fulbright Senior Specialists Program, which provides short-term (two to six week) academic opportunities to "prominent US faculty and professionals to support curricular and faculty development and institutional planning" at academic institutions around the globe.

My journey as a Senior Fulbright Specialist in Business Administration in Italy began on March 5, 2008 when I boarded Northwest flight 98 in Bradley Airport to Amsterdam Schiphol. This new airline route provides a direct route to Europe, had been eagerly awaited, and, propitiously, the Fulbright Commission requires a US carrier for transoceanic flights. Although our departure was late I had hopes of making my next connection to Milan Linate (the smaller airport in Milan) via Alitalia and then onward on another flight to Catania. The University of Catania on the island of Sicily was my host institution for the two week Fulbright. I settled in comfortably into my seat and knowing the grueling additional journey that awaited me drifted off to sleep. The flight itself was uneventful but its arrival too late for me to make the next connection. Then the negotiations began between Alitalia on the one side, KLM/Northwest on the other side (these airlines are in acrimonious discussions due to a possible merger), and me in the middle at 8:30AM Amsterdam time at T2, the location for transfers at Schiphol. I was informed that I needed to contact my US travel agent (who I knew would still be sleeping for several hours) to rebook for the next day and so I checked into the Sheraton hotel at the Amsterdam airport and informed my Italian hosts that I would be arriving a day late.

The next morning, at 6:30AM as I was checking out of the Sheraton I heard "Dr. Nagurney, Dr. Nagurney, do you remember me?!" Standing in front of me was one of my former Isenberg School of Management students who had since graduated, had received his MBA from Harvard, and who was on a business trip in Europe. From that point on I knew that the Fulbright would be special and an adventure. I arrived later that day, along with my luggage, at the brand new and lovely Catania airport, took a 15 minute taxi ride to the Una Palace Hotel, and was greeted by my host, Professor Patrizia Daniele. Together, as part of the Fulbright, we had organized a workshop on *Complex Networks: Equilibrium and Vulnerability Analysis with Applications* that was to take place the following Monday through Wednesday. The goals of my Fulbright were to lead the workshop, which explored the importance and analysis of networks ranging from congested urban transportation systems to supply chains, including electric power ones, the Internet, and financial networks. I was also to give a two hour lecture to an undergraduate class, to evaluate curricular materials, and to give additional lectures.

The three-day workshop exceeded our expectations -- not only did we have lively discussions from faculty participants from the University of Catania (many of whom had never met one another since they were in different departments or schools) but also from workshop participants from Naples, Messina, Calabria, and Genoa. There were even presentations from undergraduate students and graduate students! Top level administrators greeted and welcomed us and a special cake decorated as an Italian flag with my name on it and filled with rum and cream was offered. The workshop was a great success and the audience members commented on how terrific it was that we had brought different disciplines together to tackle some of the most challenging problems today. There were many female speakers and for some it was the first time that they had been invited to speak at the University of Catania. Sicilian foods and desserts were served during the workshop breaks and lunches and new friendships and colleagues made.

One of the highlights of the experience was teaching the undergraduate class. The names of the students sounded like those of characters in an opera -- from Concetta to Giuseppe. I gave the lecture *Operations Research and the Captivating Study of Networks and Complex Decision-making*. The opportunity to talk with the students afterwards about their hopes and dreams was eye-opening. Despite the education that they were receiving they had minimal hopes for obtaining good jobs after graduation. The eagerness in their

eyes was evident and after the lecture I was touched by a standing ovation. The curriculum is quite advanced but many courses never make use of computer technology and students, typically, have no assigned homework and no projects or presentations. Each undergraduate class meets for 60 hours with a half an hour final oral exam per pupil. Courses offered in the Undergraduate Operations Research curriculum include: Optimization, Game Theory, Operations Research, and even Networks and Supernetworks! The contrast in educational styles there versus what we do at the Isenberg School of Management at UMass Amherst was truly enlightening. I offered many suggestions as to how to enhance the students' educational experiences.

Catania is a geological and historical wonder. It is the second largest city in Sicily with Mt. Etna (which still periodically erupts) in the background and the Mediterranean in the foreground. It has architecture dating to ancient Greek and Roman times, which has survived both earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, and the streets are made of lava stone. Flowers, palm trees, and cacti dot the magnificent plazas, along with churches and cathedrals. The sunny streets of Catania are filled with pedestrians of all ages enjoying the sights, the sense of community, and the marvelous stores, pastry shops, and gelaterias. The pedestrian and vehicular traffic were both fascinating to watch and to experience, which just added to the currency of the Fulbright Specialists theme!

The logistical support provided by my hosts was incredible -- from pickups and dropoffs at my hotel, which was located on Via Etnea, the majestic central boulevard of Catania. The ride to the University each morning involved navigating through 6-7 lanes of traffic in parts, filled with (often-dented) vehicles and motorcycles. As for the latter, they sometimes have to be dodged even on the sidewalks.

Mid-way through the Fulbright, my family joined me and the hosts entertained us all by welcoming us in their homes and taking us out to eat. A fish caught earlier in the day would be brought to our table and then a delicious stew prepared. The lunches on weekends would last for hours with conversations accompanying numerous courses. The importance and value of time for family and friends made us truly enjoy one another. We saw a massive funeral at the cathedral, which we later found out was for a father of a prominent politician. We saw a wedding taking place in the plaza next to the funeral. We marveled at the variety of police in uniform and the different types of police cars, be they for the "carabinieri" or the "municipale" or for the "penitenziari." We were struck by the contrasts of families spending hours at cafes and then being approached by children no more than 6 or 7 begging for money (with no obvious parental unit in sight).

The Fulbright experience ended much too quickly but the memories will last a lifetime. The beauty of the Sicilian landscape, the warmth and durability of its people, as well as the contrasts in what the US has to offer its citizens and that which the denizens of Sicily have. On the way back from Schiphol to Bradley, I was greeted by a fellow UMass Amherst faculty member and neighbor who was also on the flight. Virtual connections are good but nothing beats the enriching experiences of face-to-face interactions across time-zones and cultures!

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Anna Nagurney - March 2008