

China trip prepares EKU students for international business



PHOTOS BY EDMUND FENTON

A look at the EKU trip to China. The trip exposed the students to many of the traditional tourist sites like the Great Wall, but also created an opportunity for them to experience the business climate.

By Stephanie Kerr
BUSINESS LEZINGTON

As the global economy continues to grow, businesses searching for prospective employees to have traveled overseas are getting a little help from Eastern Kentucky University's (EKU) Business & Technology College, which recently completed a test run of a new three-credit, condensed study abroad program. Under the direction and guidance of EKU accounting professor Dr. Ed Fenton, 12 EKU marketing, accounting, management and international business students spent 10 days in China, gaining first-hand knowledge about international business and international travel.

"As far as I know, this 'course' is the first of its kind at EKU, although I have done this several times before at a different university," Dr. Fenton said. "We had numerous things we wanted to accomplish, not the least of which was introducing students, some of whom have never traveled out of Kentucky, to the rigors of international travel in a way that would make them want to do it again. Also high on our list was to give them an opportunity to appreciate the differences in the way business is conducted here versus China."

According to the students and Dr. Fenton, this study abroad version is more manageable for many students.

"Most study abroad programs require students to be away for at least a semester, and sometimes up to a year, in order to earn the same course credits," Dr. Fenton said. "The benefit of this program is that students can continue their regular course of study, earning credits in other subject areas in addition to this course, and they spend less time away from work and family."

The course actually lasts the entire semester, with the weeks leading up to the trip spent preparing for travel — finding ways to pack 10-days of clothing into carry-



on luggage, applying for a visa and/or passport, learning some Mandarin Chinese phrases — and completing the required reading for the course.

"I asked the students to read two books, one focused on global business and the other more specific to China, as preparation for meeting business leaders once we arrived in China," Dr. Fenton said. "Now that the trip is complete, each student must choose a topic within their major and write a research paper on that topic utilizing their experiences in China."

Preparing for cultural differences was also on the group's agenda according to EKU senior accounting and business major, Benjamin Fryer, although much of that came during the trip.

"Of course, we all had to learn to eat with chopsticks," Fryer said, "but that was really secondary to knowing things like the proper protocol for seating at a dinner or how high to hold your glass when you toast someone, or how to accept and present a business card."

Fryer, who signed up for the trip to see whether or not he was really interested in

pursuing a career with a company that demanded international travel, called the trip a "lifetime learning experience."

"I experienced more in 10 days than in a semester on campus," Fryer said. "I would definitely like to work for a CPA firm that has global connections and I would feel more comfortable going to a foreign country now because I know the kinds of things that I would need to look for that are different from the way they are here, such as who sits down first at a business meal."

"I also discovered I really like the way the Chinese conduct business, in that they want to get to know you before you do any business and that they prefer to create relationships rather than just complete whatever the business transaction is. This is hands-on experience that I'll be able to bring to the table when I start sending out my resumé."

Agreeing with Fryer, Dr. Fenton added that exposure to a different culture first-hand, rather than just learning through books, videos, television and classroom discussion, is a plus for both an employer and a prospective employee.

"Many American companies are opening facilities in China, a country that is currently fourth in terms of gross domestic product behind the United States, Japan and Germany, but is growing rapidly," Dr. Fenton said. "It will be critical for employers to find employees who are already familiar with international travel, have already visited international businesses, in this case in China, and who already have a taste for the international environment."

He added that these students will also be able to point out to prospective employers that they can handle themselves in international business situations because they have already had the experience of meeting and/or eating with the directors or presidents of global companies such as Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide, DHL, Kennemetal and Price Waterhouse Coopers.

Nichel Eubanks, EKU senior music marketing major, already had plans to start her own business after she graduates and decided to take the course so she could "travel to another country and experience its culture." According to her, however, the experience changed her business focus.

"I don't know that I was thinking about starting a global company before we went, but I am now," she said, "and I'll be better prepared to do that successfully. I really had no awareness of the differences in business practices among countries, but I now know that whether I work for someone else or start my own business, there is a lot of research to be done prior to opening an office in a different country so that it meets the needs and standards of the business community, and the potential customers. I also learned that just because you're a U.S.-based company, you won't necessarily be successful if you don't use local talent to staff your offices. I'm glad I learned that now before I graduated than after when I could have made some huge mistakes that could cause me to fail."