Since its development in the 17th century, Amsterdam’s Canal Ring has grown to be one of the world’s most unique urban landscapes. And celebrating its 400th birthday in 2013, the Canal Ring not only remains a historic and beautiful water network through the city, but a stunning backdrop for fantastic cultural and sporting events throughout the year (front cover). The Golden Temple in Dambulla, Sri Lanka, by UMD student Sphoorti Pandit (inside cover). Sunrise in Vinales Valley, Cuba (back cover).
Maryland Continues to Set High Standard for Number of Fulbright Grants

With 15 new Fulbright grants this year, Maryland students and recent graduates have earned a total of 70 Fulbright grants in the past five years. Maryland’s newest Fulbrighters will travel to 12 different countries on five continents. The Fulbright U.S. Student Program provides more than 1,900 awards annually for students and young professionals to pursue international study, research, and teaching experience.

UMD Joins Prestigious Universitas 21 Network

Universitas 21 is a vibrant global network of research-intensive universities from 17 countries that work together to foster global citizenship and institutional innovation through research-inspired teaching and learning, student mobility, and wider advocacy for internationalization.

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

6  GLOBAL RESEARCH: UMD Students Present Research on Global Stage
8  CAMPUS NEWS: Looking at Human Rights through an International Lens
9  GLOBAL RESEARCH: The Changing Face of Traditional Theater in Post-Revolutionary Cuba
10  STUDY ABROAD: Carrie Hildebrandt: Reflections from Israel
12  CAMPUS NEWS: Making the Global Local: The SLLC Language Partner Program
13  CAMPUS NEWS: Maryland Student Wins Regional Chinese Bridge Language Competition
14  ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: MBA Students Provide Hands-on Consulting in Sri Lanka
With 15 new Fulbright grants this year, Maryland students and recent graduates have earned a total of 70 Fulbright grants in the past five years. Maryland’s newest Fulbrighters will travel to 12 different countries on five continents. Two recipients also received the Fulbright Critical Language Enhancement Award, which will provide them with advanced language training during their grant period. The Fulbright U.S. Student Program provides more than 1,900 awards annually for students and young professionals to pursue international study, research, and teaching experience.

“Maryland’s undergraduate and graduate recipients of the Fulbright grant are an extraordinarily talented and adventuresome group of students and a credit to the departments where they study. From teaching English in Turkey, to exploring the experiences of women secondary school teachers in Ethiopia, to learning about the art and practice of clowning in Indonesia, these students set a high standard of accomplishment for the whole University,” says Professor James Gilbert, Maryland’s Fulbright program adviser.

The Fulbright Program is the flagship international educational exchange program sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. Since its establishment in 1946 under legislation introduced by the late U.S. Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas, the Fulbright Program has given approximately 318,000 students, scholars, teachers, artists, and scientists the opportunity to study, teach and conduct research, exchange ideas and contribute to finding solutions to shared international concerns. Recipients of Fulbright grants are selected on the basis of academic or professional achievement, as well as demonstrated leadership potential in their fields. The Fulbright U.S. Student Program operates in more than 140 countries worldwide. A total of 38 Maryland students applied for the 2013-2014 Fulbright grants.

By Francis DuVinage, National Scholarships Office and Maryland Center for Undergraduate Research
nnesburg area. He will elicit perspectives from these youth on the skills and learning experiences they see as important in their transition to adulthood and the world of work.

Ashley Enrici (Indonesia), a Ph.D. candidate in geographical sciences, will research the recent extension of the UN’s Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) program. Enrici will examine implementation challenges of the REDD+ program that two forest communities face. She also received Fulbright’s Critical Language Enhancement Award to study Bahasa Indonesia.

Alex Gittelson (Russia), a 2009 B.S. alumnus of agricultural and resource economics, will research alternatives to agricultural burning in Russia. He is currently an international affairs specialist with the Foreign Agricultural Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, focusing on policy issues related to energy, climate, safety, and security.

Amina Goheer (Turkey), a 2012 alumna with B.A. degrees in government and politics and Arabic studies, has been awarded an English Teaching Assistantship. Following her Fulbright year she plans to pursue a master’s degree in international development or global public health.

Harrison Guthorn (Jordan), a Ph.D. candidate in history, will examine how the city of Amman developed. He will focus on its development as the capital of Transjordan during the Mandate period, a critical time for both the history of Jordan and the entire Middle East. Guthorn also received Fulbright’s Critical Enhancement Award to study Arabic.

James Hesla (Indonesia), a Ph.D. candidate in theatre and performance studies, will research Balinese clowns and clowning in traditional masked dance-drama. He will consider how clowns and clowning both reflect and have an impact on Balinese cultural values in performance and performer training.

Elana Mayer (Mexico), a history and Spanish double major, received her B.A. and earned a Latin American studies certificate. She has been awarded an English Teaching Assistantship where she will serve as an English language and cultural assistant at a public university. Upon her return from Mexico, Mayer plans to become a high school Spanish and/or ESL teacher.

Sonia Prescott (Panama), a Ph.D. candidate in history, will research Afro-Antillean contributions to the labor movement in Panama. She will focus on the role of racial propaganda in defining how these protests gained or lost the support of the larger Panamanian society.

Katherine Rennenkampf (Indonesia), a mathematics, English, and economics triple major, graduated with a B.S. She has been awarded a Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship. Rennenkampf, who aspires to become a math educator at the secondary level, will also be pursuing a project to learn about Indonesia’s recent steps in reforming its mathematics curricula.

Mary Kate Schneider (Bosnia and Herzegovina) is a Ph.D. candidate in government and politics. She will research the effects of divided education in Bosnia and Herzegovina by exploring how education policies affect interethnic perceptions and attitudes.

Yu-Chi Wang (Taiwan) is a May 2013 graduate with B.S. degrees in psychology and biology. She has been awarded a Fulbright grant to teach English in Taiwan. After the completion of her Fulbright year, Wang plans to pursue a master’s degree in industrial/organizational psychology and to use her Chinese language skills to work internationally in this field.

Kimberly Wilson (Taiwan), a Ph.D. candidate in government and politics, will examine Taiwan’s maritime and territorial claims in the South China Sea. Wilson’s project will build on her current dissertation research in China, which is funded by a 2012-2013 Boren Fellowship.

Jesse Zarley (Chile) is a Ph.D. student in the department of history. He will research how the indigenous Mapuche population of southern Chile successfully resisted conquest and colonization by the Spanish Empire and the Chilean nation during the 18th and 19th centuries.
UMD Expands Its Global Footprint As New Member

The University of Maryland has recently joined ranks with 27 leading research universities as a new member of Universitas 21 (U21). U21 is a vibrant global network of research-intensive universities from 17 countries that work together to foster global citizenship and institutional innovation through research-inspired teaching and learning, student mobility, and wider advocacy for internationalization. The collective membership enrolls over 1.3 million students, employs 220,000 staff and faculty, and has an annual research income in excess of $6.5 billion. UMD is one of only four U.S. universities participating in the network.

Furthe...
UMD Expands Its Global Footprint As New Member of Prestigious Universitas 21 Network

U21 will significantly increase Maryland students’ access to study abroad exchanges, enabling them to spend a semester at some of the world’s greatest universities for the price of in-state tuition. The network’s undergraduate research conferences (see article below) will allow the brightest students to present their results on a global stage. Students can attend summer schools built around a specific theme each year (see article on page 8), as well as participate in study abroad programs centered on social entrepreneurship.

Graduate students will find research opportunities, as well as a venue to present their work to international peers, making them more competitive in the increasingly global marketplace. Through U21, faculty can engage in joint research and joint teaching, using online technology to bring students from around the world into virtual “global classrooms.”

A further benefit of membership in U21 is the chance to showcase the unique academic and research strengths of UMD by hosting network activities or events that will bring international students, faculty, researchers, and university leaders within the network to the College Park campus.

Opportunities for international collaboration through U21 will expand dramatically and will reach across academic disciplines. Members of the university community are encouraged to follow the ongoing activities and developments within the network by signing up at http://ter.ps/u21news to receive U21 e-bulletins and newsletters.

“International education is undergoing fundamental change, and U21 will help keep us at the forefront,” says UMD’s Associate Vice President for International Affairs Ross Lewin. “In our increasingly interconnected world, bilateral relationships are no longer adequate. Multilateral programs with institutions from many countries give everyone in the network a much greater reach. Membership in U21 will allow UMD to connect with many of the best universities in the world at once. It will advance our mission of bringing the world to the campus and projecting the University onto the world stage.”

By Jennifer Precht, OIA

UMD Students Present Research on Global Stage and Jewish studies, gave an oral presentation focusing on the challenges and opportunities for water management and allocation between Israel and the Palestinian Territories. “My undergraduate degree begs for such a multidisciplinary environment, and the conversations I had with others regarding my research and theirs motivated me to continue exploring the interaction of the many [areas] of thought playing active roles in my field.” The connections made during this international experience will serve Westheimer well as she spends the next year continuing her research abroad with the Center for Transboundary Water Management at the Arava Institute in Israel.

Beyond the immediate tangible benefits of taking part in such a conference—networking, sharing ideas, exchanging techniques and approaches, and revising traditional thinking—the long-term intended outcome is to facilitate international collaboration in undergraduate student research among members of the network who are similarly engaged. Social activities strategically built into the program were designed to create a comfortable atmosphere for relationship building and to provide a less formal space for interaction. UMD senior Kevin Li noted, “I quickly made friends with other presenters and advisors there, who offered a diverse array of experiences and knowledge, as well as opportunities and connections for research around the world.” Li presented his Gemstone team’s research in the area of “aquaponics,” focusing primarily on the use of alternative nutrient feeds to replace more expensive and unsustainable commercial feeds.

Creating connections for future research collaboration was not an activity limited to students. Faculty and staff whose role is to support undergraduate research at their institutions were invited to join their students in Amsterdam to engage with U21 colleagues and develop their own

By Jennifer Precht, OIA

Continued on next page >>

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Looking at Human Rights through an International Lens

The transformative international experiences made available through UMD’s Universitas 21 (U21) membership have already begun leaving their mark on the university community. An inaugural cohort of five Maryland students was chosen to represent UMD at the 2013 U21 Summer School built around the theme of human rights. The annual summer seminar, hosted this year by the University of Connecticut, brought together 87 students from 19 universities around the world for an intensive two-week program of lectures, animated discussions, project-based learning, and relationship building. Guided by a dozen human rights experts from U21 member institutions, this international gathering of students examined key issues in human rights, visited the United Nations, and met with highly accomplished human rights practitioners from major non-governmental organizations in New York City as well as human rights agencies and activists in Connecticut.

Engaging with such a diverse group of students, representing a wide spectrum of viewpoints and experiences, naturally promoted dialogue and the sharing of ideas. “One of the biggest advantages of participating in the U21 consortium was being able to interact with and learn from students from almost every continent. I think I can safely say that I learned as much from my peers as I did from the academic portion of the program,” says Maryland student Mia Rizvi.

Direct access to leading human rights scholars, practitioners, and organizations provided the benefit of a real world perspective. Being able to talk with human rights activists about their professions gave UMD students first-hand insight into the workplace and stimulated thinking about potential future career paths. Discussions on the legal aspect of human rights helped UMD student Sandra Shaker to “understand how law can be used to create change in the world. … With this increased clarity, I have begun thinking about what I want to impact when I get into the workforce.”

A highlight of the U21 Summer School was the opportunity for students to practice and apply knowledge professional networks. Kristan Skendall, associate director of the Gemstone Program, served as faculty mentor to the three Maryland students. “The interdisciplinary nature of the research and the outstanding caliber of the students make the U21 consortium a critical place for creating partnerships to advance our educational mission,” says Skendall.

The opportunity for students to present their original research in front of an international audience of their peers is precisely the type of professional development experience that UMD is aiming to provide as it strives to prepare its students for life and work in a globalized society. “Students at Maryland are engaged in an amazing range of cutting-edge research endeavors, and the opportunity to engage their peers around the world through programs like the U21 Undergraduate Research Conference adds an invaluable new dimension to their experience. We look forward to the many new and dynamic opportunities for undergraduate involvement in international research collaborations through the Universitas 21 consortium,” says Francis Duvinage, director of the Maryland Center for Undergraduate Research.

By Jennifer Precht, OIA

Continued from page 7
Modern Cuba is home to an incongruous mixture of modern and traditional. Bustling, urban Havana is a remarkable contrast with the remote and isolated countryside, where many Cubans live and work.

Laurie Frederik Meer, a professor in UMD’s School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies, arrived in Cuba’s eastern Guantanamo Province on the back of a Russian flatbed truck accompanied by 24 Cuban artists and theater performers. She conducted ethnographic field research for more than two years, attached to a troupe of performing artists who trekked into the most isolated parts of Cuba’s mountain terrain. These artists presented outdoor theater that celebrated cubanía (Cuban-ness) and the beloved campesino (farmer), while at the same time questioning their traditional role in a modern Communist society.

Meer’s research focuses on culture and politics through the lens of the performing arts. As an anthropologist, she examines how and why particular cultures use theater to define themselves and deal with social and ethical conflicts. She explores the ways Cuban people and the state use theater arts for both propaganda purposes as well as to raise subversive questions—a possibility unique to live theater through gesture, facial expression, humor, metaphor, and poetic nuances. By funding arts groups that represent acceptable messages, the government creates a mouthpiece to engage the people, and artists are able to reach a broader audience (as long as they are critically discreet), develop new works, and optimize their artistic contribution.

Theater performances attract mostly Cuban audiences, even in such urban areas as Havana. But now that performances of cubanía increasingly include Afro-Cuban religious traditions (Santería), drumming and dance, it has also become an important source of tourism revenue, boosting Cuba’s impoverished economy.

In her new book, Trumpets in the Mountains, Meer provides a fascinating look at Cuba’s shift in national identity and its impact on performing arts. This sort of longitudinal research provides a glimpse at how the visions of this struggling nation, only 90 miles from the United States, are developed, manipulated, and dramatized.

*By Missy McTamney, Clarice Smith Center*
Carrie Hildebrandt grew up about 45 minutes from College Park, and like many University of Maryland students, she enjoys spending time with friends and family and has a diverse array of interests. Hildebrandt’s studies at Maryland consist of a major in Arabic studies and minors in French language and literature and international development and conflict management. When it came time to think about rounding out her academic career, she found the study abroad program in Haifa to be the perfect fit by offering firsthand knowledge on what she was learning in class and having a uniquely diverse community.

This past spring, President Wallace Loh met with Hildebrandt during his educational and trade mission to Israel with Governor Martin O’Malley. “There is simply no substitute for firsthand experience of our interdependent world. Consider the example of Carrie, a junior UMD student I just met. She learned Arabic at UMD and is studying Hebrew this semester at Haifa. She is also interning in an Arab community, helping released convicts re-integrate into society. This summer she will have another internship in Jerusalem. Next fall, she will continue her studies as a Philip Merrill Scholar back in College Park. When we graduate global citizens like Carrie, the student benefits and so does Maryland.”

While interning in Israel, Hildebrandt took some time to answer a few questions about her experience for Maryland International:

What was it like meeting President Loh while studying abroad?
CH: As many friends and professors have noted, it’s somewhat ironic that I had to fly halfway across the world just to meet the president of my home university, but regardless of the irony, it was a great experience. He was very personable, and I feel very honored and touched to have made such a positive impression.

What were some expectations you had prior to your semester abroad? Did those turn out to be true?
CH: After being here for so many months, it’s sort of odd to think about my expectations before coming here. Even if you’re an independent thinker, it’s hard to resist the media image that you get about a violent and dangerous Israel, especially when there are missiles hitting a few months before you leave. What you don’t realize until you get here is how different that is from the reality that you experience in Israel.

Were there any differences between living in College Park and living in Haifa that you did not expect?
CH: While there weren’t really any differences that were shocking or unexpected, there were some pleasant surprises. Haifa’s campus, like College Park, is vibrant with lots of events going on. The deshe (similar to McKeldin Mall) is always packed with people and hosts a free party and arts fair at least once a week.

What has been your experience with meeting local students and finding activities on campus?
CH: Haifa University does a really excellent job at integrating students into campus. As soon as we got there, we were introduced to a team of social coordinators who were our first Israeli friends (or at least mine) and who, in addition to planning tons of interesting activities to keep us busy, were able to answer any questions we had even if they were as simple as what bus to take. In addition, the Student Union was eager to reach out to us and has established a program called Adopt-a-Student, where local Israeli students “adopt” international students and help give them a personal look at Israeli culture and life in Haifa. Last but definitely not least, we lived in the dorms with our Israeli peers, and I was...
Reflections from Israel

Carrie Hildebrandt: Reflections from Israel

CH: In my first month here, I discovered capoeira—an Afro-Brazilian art form that combines elements of martial arts, music, and dance. And, it’s become one of the defining qualities of my time in Israel. While capoeira originates in Brazil, it, like just about everything from South America, has become quite popular here. I started going to class with one of the social coordinators, Keren, and about six months later I’m still practicing but within a new group in Jerusalem. The capoeira community is incredibly welcoming, and the sport itself is energetic and fun as well as a great way to meet new people!

Will you tell us about the internship you had this spring semester?

CH: While my internship this spring was definitely way out of my field of study, it was an awesome experience, and I’m so glad I decided to give it a try. I worked with House of Grace, which is a prisoner rehabilitation center in downtown Haifa run by Orthodox Christians. In addition to serving released prisoners, the House also assists low-income families as part of a larger goal of aiding the most marginalized members of society. The employees are truly inspirational and have sacrificed a lot personally to keep the house running and make sure they are helping as much as they can. Since they are short staffed, they don’t have much time for outreach, so while I was there I worked on their website and Facebook page, as well as helping with grant proposals. My favorite part was interviewing the director, Agnes, and getting the chance to hear some of her stories.

Why did you decide to stay and do another internship this summer?

CH: Early on while in Haifa, I started to think about the prospect of staying. I was applying to a ton of internships in D.C., all in the area of conflict resolution, and I thought, why leave somewhere where I can witness a conflict firsthand to go sit behind a desk and research conflicts on my computer?

What will you miss the most?

CH: It’s hard to pick just one, but I think I’ll have to go with the food. I’ve always been a big Middle East foodie and having falafel stands on every corner and restaurants that serve up delicious plates of hummus is definitely not something I’m ready to give up. Plus, instead of driving to a fluorescent-lit big box grocery store, I do my weekly grocery shopping at the shuk, or open market, where I can’t help but smile at the vibrant and lively atmosphere. I get to stroll through the open street as vendors yell obscenely low prices at me, and as a savvy shopper, I can now get all of my vegetables and fruit for the week for about $12-$15. It’s made my diet even healthier.

By Deborah Lake, Education Abroad
The Language Partner Program (LPP)—a joint venture of the School of Languages, Literatures and Cultures (SLLC), Education Abroad, and International Student & Scholar Services (ISSS)—was conceptualized to complement the curricular offerings of language departments by pairing UMD language majors with campus international students, or language partners, who are native speakers of those languages. While language majors sign up for SLLC309, language partners receive a modest stipend for their participation. The instructional setting is an informal but structured weekly meeting over the course of a semester during which language pairs converse on pre-described topics—such as schooling, family, travel, and cultural traditions—after which they branch out to other topics of mutual interest. Three mandatory class sessions with faculty presenters from the program offer students insight into cross-cultural and cross-linguistic learning.

At the end of the semester, a reflection paper tops off the academic requirements of the course. These reflections showcase the students' enthusiasm and deep appreciation of the program. Similarly, the international language partners sing equally high praises—as foreign language “experts,” they are empowered while imparting relevant cultural knowledge and language skills. In return, domestic students provide help with international students’ transition to campus, cultural integration, and serve as good resources in helping international students navigate an unfamiliar U.S. educational setting, and generally facilitate their stay in the United States and understanding of U.S. culture. “This is why I come all the way across the Pacific Ocean—to learn not only the knowledge from a thermodynamics class, but people’s attitude toward life. The people here inspire me, and they help me realize my strengths and weaknesses better, so I can plan better for my future,” says Ziming He, a Chinese language partner majoring in chemical and biomolecular engineering.

As for their outcomes, majors are excited about the marked increase in their oral and aural skills. “After participating in this program, the way I approach learning Russian has changed. I am more relaxed but, at the same time, more engaged in class. If I don’t understand something in class, I don’t get as discouraged, which previously caused me to disengage from learning. Instead, I am now more motivated and encouraged to pick-up from where I do understand, putting the class in perspective and remembering my ultimate, long-term goal,” says Anna Kusmierz, who is pursuing a double major in Central European, Russian and Eurasian studies, and Russian language and literature.

A classroom language learning experience can provide you with the basic grammar, reading, writing, and even some speaking and listening skills, but there is still so much more to learn. This ‘something more’ is exactly what my time in the Language Partner Program has given me.—Kim Cullen
Beyond the linguistic acquisition, students also recognize the intrinsic connection between learning a language and developing cultural competency: “A classroom language learning experience can provide you with the basic grammar, reading, writing, and even some speaking and listening skills, but there is still so much more to learn. This ‘something more’ is exactly what my time in the Language Partner Program has given me. My weekly meetings with a Colombian Spanish speaker have given me insight into the culture of Colombia and cultural literacy that I could never get from the classroom experience,” explains Kim Cullen, who is double majoring in environmental science and policy, and Spanish language and literature.

Both language majors and international language partners appreciate the program preparing them for successful participation in a dynamic and interconnected world. “Outside of language improvement, the LPP helps both native speakers and language learners build relationships and cultural perspectives that they might not otherwise have developed. Because of the situation, people are not only free but encouraged to ask questions of one another that might not otherwise be socially acceptable. They can bridge topics of religion, politics, cultural traditions, stereotypes, truths, and falsehoods—all of which are incredibly important in understanding another person and especially another culture. The whole experience builds amicable relationships between people who may never have interacted without this program and so missed out on this truly valuable experience,” says Audrey DuHaime, a linguistics and Arabic studies double major.

SLLC is currently accepting applications for fall 2013 at http://ter.ps/langpartner. For more information contact Gabi Strauch at gstrauch@umd.edu.

Maryland Student Wins Regional Chinese Bridge Language Competition

This past April, the Chinese Bridge Language Competition celebrated its 12th year of international college level competition in Chinese language and culture. The annual regional event has been hosted for nine years by the Confucius Institute at Maryland (CIM) as part of its mission to enhance the understanding of China in surrounding schools and communities. The three-part contest invites non-native Chinese language students to prepare a speech in Chinese, create a short cultural performance piece, and answer China-related questions in a tough Q&A segment. The winner of this area’s competition then goes on to final rounds in China.

The 2013 regional college competition at the University of Maryland involved 10 universities from states including Maryland, Nebraska, South Carolina, Utah, Virginia, and Washington, D.C., as 21 students competed for a chance to participate in the final contest in China. Rivalries in past years have always been keen between “The three Georges” in D.C. and Virginia—George Washington, George Mason, and Georgetown Universities—but this year was a thrilling breakthrough for UMD with first place going to senior Damien Liles. His humorous and compelling speech and performance earned him very high marks. Liles said afterward that because he did not expect to do anything extraordinary, he was able to relax, do his best, and have a good time, which clearly yielded exceptional results.

Liles, along with 120 other regional winners from around the world, was invited to travel to Changsha, China, this past July for three weeks of intensive language preparation and rehearsals for the final rounds of the global competition. Although Liles did not bring home the world title, he had a thrilling, eye-opening, and unforgettable experience. He said after the trip, “I have friends to visit no matter what country I find myself in.” Liles, who has studied Russian as well, hopes to obtain work in translation and interpretation for international relations.

The Confucius Institute also hosted the annual K-12 Bridge competitions, involving many area schools. Notable students hailed from Georgetown Day School in Washington, D.C., McDonogh High School in Baltimore, Baltimore International Academy, and Yu-Ying Public Charter School in D.C. The Bridge event brings together families from many backgrounds who share an interest in China and provides a forum for enhancing Chinese language and cultural awareness, building meaningful connections across communities.

The Chinese Bridge Language Competition is supported by the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Washington, D.C., a collaborator in many China initiatives at CIM and UMD. For more information about activities at CIM, visit www.international.umd.edu/cim.

By Rebecca McGinnis, CIM
In May, six Smith School of Business MBA students traveled 9,000 miles from College Park to put their business skills into practice and engage in hands-on consulting for three different Sri Lankan organizations. If all goes according to plan, the students will have helped create 290 full-time jobs in northern and eastern Sri Lanka—the regions most devastated by a 25-year civil war. And, it only took them three weeks.

The three pairs of students each assisted a local organization in refining its accounting systems, enhancing management and workflow structures, and forecasting profits. The teams also helped their organizations write concept notes for grant proposals for U.S. government funding. Upon returning to Maryland, the students learned that the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) had accepted each organization’s concept note and invited a full grant proposal.

The students’ contributions drew praise from Jaliya Wickramasuriya, Ambassador of Sri Lanka to the United States and Mexico. Prior to departing for Sri Lanka, the Ambassador invited the students to a private dinner briefing at the Embassy in Washington, D.C., during which he explained his country’s culture, history, and business norms.

“These types of small start-up business assistance programs are very beneficial to the people of Sri Lanka, and they will help ensure peace and prosperity for the country,” explains Wickramasuriya. “Promoting economic growth in these former conflict-affected regions, which suffered tremendously from the ravages of terrorism for three decades, is an important mechanism to reinforce the Government of Sri Lanka’s efforts toward lasting reconciliation. If people cannot make ends meet and there is poverty and deprivation, then it will be harder to achieve reconciliation. We appreciate these University of Maryland MBA students bringing their technical skills and business knowledge to provide assistance to my country.”

The students agreed that the experience had been professionally and personally rewarding. “I had the opportunity to create a business plan, which included financial statements, forecasts, and a marketing and management plan for a small company,” says UMD student Yasin Benzawi. “This allowed me to leverage the skills I have developed in the MBA program. I genuinely helped someone while gaining a priceless experience. I would do it again in a heartbeat.”

Benzawi and fellow student Jonathan King consulted for Sivanarul Vocational Training and Production Center, an agriculture-based manufacturing and sales business established to provide sustainable employment and vocational training opportunities to conflict-affected widows, disabled women and youth, and foster children. Established in 2012, the business includes producing varieties of packed rice flour, powdered chili and spices, coconut and sesame oils, and dry rice.
Consulting in Sri Lanka

“MBA students provide hands-on consulting in Sri Lanka. They gifted us, in a very short time period, their valuable work in the form of a revised and completed concept note and financial forecasts,” says Thirugnanasampanthar Sivapathaviruthayar, a member of Sivanarul’s board of directors. “They’ve greatly helped us succeed in providing sustainable support for conflict-affected people and war-torn communities in need.”

Another UMD student team, Jarrod Fenstermacher and Katherine Vaughn, were assigned to Oddusuddan Palms Resource Development Co-Operative Society, a co-op that sells a variety of palm by-products such as woven handicrafts, alcohol, honey, and jam. Founded in 1989, Oddusuddun’s financial records, original deeds, and nearly $14,000 in cash—the organization’s entire liquid assets—were destroyed in the civil war when the bank in which they were all deposited was bombed. The factory itself was also destroyed.

Yuan He and Natalia Markova, the third team, consulted for Nanattan Integrated Agricultural Project, which includes 4,200 members who operate such diverse businesses as rice mills, gas stations, and poultry farms.

“This type of on-the-ground experiential learning is one of the most important experiences these students will have at Smith,” says Professor Kislaya Prasad, the faculty member who managed the course. “They were challenged with putting their academic and professional talents to the test in a difficult post-conflict setting in the developing world. They performed superbly and made substantial contributions to the three Sri Lankan partners.”

Beyond significant language barriers, incomplete and paper-based accounting records, and a difficult climate, the students faced challenges unique to the developing world: a lack of hot water; long, bumpy, dusty car rides on dirt roads; and an ice cream vendor who noisily began selling his goods at 6:00 a.m. outside their hotel windows.

“This is the reality of consulting [in the developing world]: it’s often messy, frustrating, and uncomfortable,” says Vaughn. “You need to be flexible both in your expectations and your approach to problem solving. We drew on our creativity in addition to our MBA skills in coming up with workable solutions.”

This experience is part of a public-private partnership initiated by USAID to offer consulting services to Sri Lankan start-up businesses and organizations seeking grants from USAID and Land O’Lakes. Volunteers for Economic Growth Alliance and International Executive Service Corps also played key roles in implementing the program. Smith’s Center for International Business Education and Research (CIBER) and Center for Social Value Creation (CSVC) provided financial and logistical support.

“I had the opportunity to create a business plan, which included financial statements, forecasts, and a marketing and management plan for a small company. This allowed me to leverage the skills I have developed in the MBA program. I genuinely helped someone while gaining a priceless experience. I would do it again in a heartbeat.”

—Yasin Benzawi

By Matt Grieber, Smith School’s Office of Global Initiatives
To submit story ideas and photos, please contact the editor, Vivian Hayward, at vhayward@umd.edu or 301-405-4312.