

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

N.B. island puts its future in the hands of Guelph students

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Eight University of Guelph students spent a couple of weeks in Campobello Island, N.B., in May as part of their efforts to help the island chart its future.

SHOSHANAH JACOBS/UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

New Brunswick's Campobello Island holds a distinguished place in Canada's history books, including as Franklin Delano Roosevelt's summer home as a child and later as president of the United States.



a high degree of foreign real-estate ownership. One bridge (named for FDR) links the island by road to Maine but residents who want to reach New Brunswick must either take two different ferries in season to the mainland or drive through the United States.

Seeking answers for a sustainable future, island leaders turned to undergraduate students in a business consulting course at the University of Guelph's college of business and economics. Eight students took on the opportunity to work for a real client, even visiting Campobello Island for two weeks — it was the type of hands-on learning experience increasingly promoted by business schools.

“What we have never done at the college is to provide an experiential course in the business discipline,” says course instructor Ruben Burga, who, with fellow professor Shoshanah Jacobs, accompanied the students on their visit to the island last month. “An experiential course takes students and gets them to focus on specific aspects of business management,” he says, while also honing their soft skills of communication, teamwork and leadership.

Over two semesters, students learned the academic principles of business consulting and then applied them to the real-life challenges faced by the island. As part of the course, they also had to write a self-reflection essay about what they learned in school and in the field.

Last month, in preparation for a report to be presented this summer to island leaders, students travelled to the island to interview local residents and assess options for a sustainable future for the community.





The eight students were tasked with finding ways to make the sparsely populated island more viable, especially for its younger residents. 'If you are growing up here and would like to stay, how I can stay?' the students were asked. 'How can I make a living and make a life here?'

SHOSHANAH JACOBS/UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

"Our population is 850 people and 20 years ago we had about 1,500 [local residents]," says Campobello Island Mayor Stephen Smart, who contacted the Guelph, Ont., school after hearing about the consulting course from an university alumna who owns a summer cottage on the island.

"People have been teaching their children to go to school and get an education but then they leave," says Mr. Smart, also operations manager of Roosevelt Campobello International Park, jointly run by Canada and the United States. "They [young people] don't really see a future here but there are 850 of us who would like to stay in our homes."

Early in the course, Mr. Smart travelled to Guelph for an in-class session with students to lay the groundwork for their spring visit. He posed the question that islanders want answered: "If you are growing up here and would like to stay, how can I stay? How can I make a living and make a life here?"

By design, Dr. Burga and his fellow professor arranged for students to be billeted with local residents, which meant they had to integrate into the life of the community at special events, such as church suppers. Over the two weeks, he says he saw a rise in student self-confidence and an appreciation for examining a problem from multiple perspectives.

"For the students, it was an eye-opening experience," he says.

Antoni Coasley, who graduates this year with a bachelor of commerce (with an emphasis on finance), was one of the eight students selected for the Campobello Island project. "I thought it was a unique opportunity to have a different take on learning so I went for it," he says.





Island leaders were impressed that the students respectfully listened to residents without preconceived notions. 'If you come with a whole bunch of big-city ideas, it is going to be a hard sell,' Mayor Stephen Smart says.

SHOSHANAH JACOBS/UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

He says he discovered the value of listening and taking account of people's emotions and attitudes when analyzing a problem. "When you are working with real people there is a lot more of the emotional aspect," he says. "You want to do well for the community because of how engaged we became with the community."

Mr. Coasley, who aspires to become a consultant (and an entrepreneur in time), says that once on the island, he and his fellow students had to adapt classroom-taught theory to the on-the-ground realities. "[In class] we were looking at things in isolation but once we began to speak to people we could see that a lot of things were interrelated," he says.

The mayor says he and others on the island were impressed by the students' willingness to listen.

"If you come in with a whole bunch of big-city ideas, it is going to be a hard sell," he says. "The students were all very respectful."



Guelph officials seem similarly inclined. “It was an exciting pilot that we were eager to try,” says Melanie Lang, executive director of the Centre for Business and Student Enterprise. “It has worked out really well.”

Options for the island’s next steps are still under debate but Mr. Coasley says he is confident of its future. “I don’t think the answers come from outside forces,” he says. “The community has a future and the ability to sustain itself and grow.”

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