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Issue 37, Spring 2010

## **A Laboratory of Culture Shock: Delivering American Education in Siberia**

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### **Omsk**

Omsk is a fairly big city in West Siberia with a population of about 1.5 million, which is located some 3,000 miles to the east of Moscow on the border of Russia and Kazakhstan. In the period of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Russian Civil War, Omsk was declared the capital of the country by the White Russian government of Admiral Kolchak. In the Soviet period, it evolved as a center of the rich petrochemical, industrial and agricultural region. In the darkness of post-Soviet privatization, the country's largest oil refinery plant located in Omsk was seized by Roman Abramovich, the same business tycoon who became world famous as the new owner of Chelsea, London's legendary soccer club. In Omsk, he sponsors Avangard, one of the leading ice hockey clubs in the country and the new home for Jaromir Jagr, a famous Czech, who joined Avangard after many glorious years with the New York Rangers. But Jaromir was not the first famous person from New York who came to visit Omsk. Tom Rocco from SUNY Empire State College had landed there 10 years before Jagr to sign a memorandum of understanding with Omsk State University.

Omsk State University (OmSU) was established in 1973 and currently has nearly 12,000 full-time students. This

is a comprehensive multidisciplinary university with a large Ph.D. program. It has a strong national reputation in math, history and jurisprudence. Some of the professors and graduates are recognized nationally, including a member of the Supreme Court and the former general-prosecutor of the country. In the beginning of the '90s, the university started to develop its first ever international program. For a city that had been completely closed to the outer world for more than seven decades, this was an extraordinary and unprecedented initiative. As such, it had its both enthusiastic supporters and vigorous opponents. As the one who initiated the project, I was charged with the responsibility to lead the effort. At the time, I held the rank of vice president for marketing, enrollment management and international programs; I was later elected to take over as founding dean of the newly created international business school of OmSU.

In 1993, the Faculty of International Business at OmSU was created as a small undergraduate department with only 30 students. The mission of the new school was to help create a new wave of globally competent business leaders and innovators. By 1997, a number of small-scale collaborative projects with universities from the U.S., U.K., Canada and Australia were under way. We felt that it was timely to launch a larger scale international program and were looking for a partnership with a U.S.-based university. Our goal was to effectively differentiate the school from the competition on the local market and to become a true leader in international education in the vast area of West Siberia and North Kazakhstan.

### **Why Empire State College?**

In 1997, the American Consulate in Yekaterinburg invited me to visit a number of leading business schools in the U.S. This was a unique chance to meet with presidents, deans, business faculty and students from Wharton, Stanford, Columbia, Stern, Kelley, Drexler, George Mason and many other schools across the country. In addition to the busy official schedule, I arranged a few private meetings with nonparticipating universities, including a meeting with Richard Bonnabeau from Empire State College. I found Empire State College on the Internet looking for colleges offering both "90 credits transfer" and "distance learning." In return, Empire State College's Center for International Programs indicated its interest in discussing these two options during my visit to the U.S.

Richard came to New York City to meet with me at a hotel near the Empire State Building. Our first conversation went well. I think that without this brief face-to-face meeting it wouldn't have been possible to develop a high degree of trust and mutual understanding that was needed to quickly develop a doable plan of action. To streamline the process, I soon returned to the U.S., this time accompanied by Dr. Yuri Dous, now dean of the Omsk School of International Business. In Saratoga Springs, we had a successful meeting with the then acting president of the college, Jane Altes, and the cabinet. Two months after the meeting, senior dean, Tom Rocco, arrived in Omsk. A memorandum of understanding between the two institutions was finally signed, with Leonid Polezhaev, with the governor of Omsk Oblast [region], as a witness.

According to the initial plan, every year, ten third-year students from the OmSU Faculty of International Business would be invited to begin their studies at Empire State College through international distance learning (IDL). To get a SUNY Bachelor of Science degree in Business, Management and Economics, they were supposed to transfer 96 credits taken in Omsk towards the degree. The remaining 32 advanced- Valeri Chukhlomin level credits were required to be taken from Empire State College through IDL. To administer the program, a Russian-American Program office was created in Omsk. By July 1998, the first cohort of Omsk students was preparing to begin their studies at Empire State College.

### **In the shadows of the 1998 default**

In August 1998, just two weeks before the planned launch of the collaborative program, the Russian economy defaulted. In a few weeks, the ruble lost 80 percent of its value against the U.S. dollar. The local middle class was literally wiped out. For local students, practically overnight, the cost of participation in the program increased by 500 percent. We found ourselves with only two students who were able to pay \$240 per credit for IDL courses. In addition, we soon learned that SUNY introduced a major curricular reform implementing general education requirements. The double degree plan that had been carefully drafted and agreed upon suddenly became obsolete. The remaining participants were still ready to pay for business courses (such as Corporate Finance), but we couldn't convince them to take SUNY gen. ed. courses (such as American History). These two external shocks nearly killed the project from its start.

To keep the project afloat, we decided to move slowly. In 1999 - 2003, the Russian- American Program office (RAO) was offering assistance to those Omsk students who were interested in taking a few IDL courses without formal matriculation. Sometimes there were only one or two students, sometimes seven or eight per term. During that period, we identified many organizational barriers to international distance learning. Students were regularly experiencing problems with registration, making payments, getting textbooks, and dealing with the local customs office. We found that the instructions provided by Empire State College for international distance learners were oftentimes not applicable to those who lived in Siberia. For example, students were advised to use credit cards for paying tuition and other fees to the college. But many local families used only debit cards that were not valid for international payments. Even if a student (or her parents) had a locally issued credit card, the issuing bank often couldn't process payments to the U.S. To make a wire transfer, many local banks requested additional and hard-to-get documentation, such as an individual agreement between Empire State College and each student. Also, we found that unexpected additional costs could be very high. For example, in order to get a \$150 textbook, students had to pay another \$100 for shipment and yet another \$100 for custom clearance. For a Siberian family, paying \$350 for a single textbook was a huge expense that exceeded, for example, the average monthly salary earned by a local public worker. To make things even more complicated, some print-based IDL courses required a faxed communication between students and instructors. At the time, international fax transmission was very expensive and in many cases faxes simply didn't get through. When received, handwritten notes of some Empire State College instructors were not comprehensible even by local English language department professors.

The responsibility of our local program office was to help students deal with organizational problems and to coordinate marketing efforts. The office was directly funded by the Omsk School of International Business with an expectation that its running costs would eventually be covered by the program fees paid by the students. It was a very small office occupying one tiny room with a New York state souvenir license plate attached to the door. To inform the students, RAO prepared and printed a set of explanatory materials written in Russian. To promote the program, it printed and distributed brochures and posters, and also developed a program website. On behalf of the students, it dealt with local banks, customs office and the Empire State College Center for International Programs. On several occasions, RAO conducted phone conferences with Empire State College colleagues, but with 11 hours of time difference, this initiative was not easy to sustain. Ultimately, our office also acquired the responsibility for some academic issues, including supervision of the English as a Second Language program, the Institutional TOEFL program, coordination of the work of visiting and expatriate English-speaking faculty, organization of study trips abroad, and communications with American universities and the U.S. Consulate in Yekaterinburg. Very often, parents of current and prospective students visited the office to talk about international programs in general. After Sept. 11, many locals came to the office to express their solidarity with the American people. Clearly, we were not only the Russian-American Program office. In an important way, we also served as an American cultural corner in Siberia.

During the early years of the Omsk project, the Empire State College Center for International Programs very patiently and consistently offered much needed support and advice usually delivered via e-mail. In addition, to better understand how the college worked with international students and to resolve the most problematic issues, on several occasions I visited Saratoga Springs. Ken Abrams, Richard Bonnabeau, Pat Lefor, Evelyn Ting, Betty Lawrence, Bidhan Chandra, Paul Trela and many Empire State College colleagues readily shared their knowledge and experience with me. In July 2002, Yuri Dous and I attended a conference in Saratoga Springs where we met with the college's partners from Lebanon and Greece. We found many similarities in our approaches. Subsequent visits to Athens and Prague helped us redesign the Omsk project to make it more successful.

### **In search of a better design**

After the first four years of the project, only one student from Omsk was able to complete all required courses and to graduate from Empire State College through IDL. Several dozen students took only a few IDL courses and then left the program. To find out the root causes and to learn more about their learning experiences, we were constantly interviewing all of our students. Many of them reported that print-based courses were not engaging; it was hard to study without personal contact with the teacher; students were not familiar with many concepts used in advanced level IDL courses; and the costs associated with IDL were considered to be very high. From American instructors who taught IDL courses we heard that some students were lacking critically important skills,

including academic writing, communication and time management. Clearly, students faced significant cross-cultural barriers, but there were also gaps in the Omsk curriculum that prevented students from taking full advantage of the model. We also found that the initial program design didn't serve the needs of all categories of students very well and we were trying to find out what needed to be changed. In particular, we learned that those students who had participated in various study-abroad projects were usually more satisfied with their learning experiences than were international distance learners. We also learned that having previous face-to-face experience with Empire State College instructors could help students to get organized for subsequent IDL courses. (For example, one student who attended the 2001 International Business Residency in Saratoga Springs was overwhelmingly satisfied and eventually opted to complete his Empire State College studies through IDL.)

To better prepare Omsk students for the American college experience, we chose to significantly redesign the entire curriculum of the school and launched a new concentration in World Economy. As part of their Russian degree studies and prior to taking advanced-level studies at Empire State College, students were required to develop a set of necessary "global" skills including English academic writing, communication, teamwork, information literacy and time management. This innovation was perhaps the most important result of the collaboration between the OmSU Faculty of International Business and Empire State College because not only a relatively small group of the project participants, but the whole student population of the school was able to benefit from the change. We also implemented other organizational changes:

- All introductory business courses were revised to incorporate the concepts and terminology commonly used in the U.S. These updated courses became an integral part of the school curriculum. In addition to classroom lectures and workshops conducted in Russian, students were provided with access to videotaped lectures in English that were purchased from Thomas Edison College.
- Several new elective courses were developed and added to the Omsk curriculum. These courses included American Financial Accounting, American History, Academic Writing (in English), Business Research Methods, Business Communications, and TOEFL preparation. These courses were taught in English, face-to-face, mainly by native speakers, and usually by expatriate teachers, who were brought to Omsk thanks to the Civic Education Project initiative. (There were wonderful and dedicated teachers like Betty Sweet, Michael Deaver and Marec Johec, just to name a few.)
- To fully satisfy SUNY general education requirements, several new electives were developed and included in the Omsk curriculum, including courses in Natural Sciences, Western and Other World Civilizations, and The Arts. These courses were taught in Russian.
- Instead of offering SUNY courses in a fully distance mode, we decided to switch to a blended learning model.
- Instead of offering a single Bachelor of Science degree, a two-step approach was introduced. Omsk students were required to initially obtain a SUNY associate degree, and only after that were they provided with a pathway to a SUNY bachelor's degree.
- An optional one-year study-abroad component was added, as well as a number of short-term study trips to the Empire State College units in Prague and Athens.

Empire State College's Center for International Programs helped us find a SUNY community college that was interested in delivering an associate degree program in Siberia in a blended format at a reasonable cost. I met with the representatives of several community colleges and negotiated an agreement with Broome Community College (BCC). As a result, BCC has joined the project and eventually took over the IDL component. To earn a SUNY Associate of Science degree, BCC required Omsk students to take five lower-level courses with them; tuition fees were only \$113 per credit; courses were Web-based (WebCT) and supported by annual BCC faculty visits to Omsk. To complete a SUNY bachelor's degree, graduates of this new program were required to go to the Empire State College's Prague unit for one year. The new program design proved to be much more appropriate for the local conditions. Fortunately, by the end of 2004, the overall macroeconomic situation in Russia had significantly improved and more local families could afford to pay for international programs. With more potential participants, a significantly modified project was ready to relaunch.

## Success, finally

In 2004, the first two students successfully completed the updated program in Omsk, which included the one required year with the Empire State College unit in Prague. Soon, they found very good employment with the Moscow office of Proctor and Gamble and with a leading French bank. Empire State College's Prague unit did an excellent job of preparing them for a successful career. In particular, in their conversation with me, the students spoke highly of their significantly improved academic writing and communication skills and the invaluable experience gained at job fairs organized by Empire State College in Prague. This was a much needed success story for those Omsk parents who wanted their children to relocate to Moscow for a professional career. Since then, the program has been rapidly growing.

As much as I am aware, by 2009 more than 50 students from Omsk have obtained SUNY degrees. In addition, there is another large group of SUNY graduates in a nearby city of Novosibirsk. During this time, the OmSU Faculty of International Business grew from 100 to almost 500 full-time students. In 2008, it started its first master's level program. Some of the graduates of the undergraduate program have recently earned M.B.A. degrees from the University of Chicago Business School, Columbia University, Carnegie Mellon, DePaul, the University of Sydney and other leading international business schools. As a result of on-going cooperation with Empire State College, this innovative program developed in Omsk helped the school become an undisputed leader in the field of international education in the vast area of West Siberia and North Kazakhstan.

After the initial trial-and-error period, the Omsk model was carefully studied by other Siberian universities. In June 2004, two vice presidents of major public universities located in Novosibirsk and Tomsk joined me to attend an Empire State College graduation ceremony in Prague. As a result, they elected to launch similar projects. I provided both institutions with advice. It took only two years for Novosibirsk State University of Economics and Finance to launch its own international business program – a replica of Omsk. Currently, both programs (Omsk and Novosibirsk) continue working closely with SUNY BCC and Empire State College through its Center for International Programs.

Since my transition to Empire State College as a full-time mentor, I have been trying to revitalize the initial design of a double degree program based upon international distance learning without the study-abroad component. With significantly improved online technologies, including video, synchronous and asynchronous communications, and academic skills development systems, this goal seems to be more realistic now than in the 90s. Thus, for example, under an agreement with the Center for Distance Learning at Tomsk State University of Radioelectronics and Control Systems (TUSUR), 25 students have taken IDL courses in 2007 - 2009. For those students, a new bilingual bridging course, International eLearning Skills, has been developed. It is expected that the first SUNY bachelor's degree will be awarded this year.

From *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America* (1995, 421): Teachers experimented with ways to create a common space where meaningful work could be done. The quality of reflective experimentation, of trying new things, of tinkering and adjusting, sometimes with uneven results, sometimes failing, was part of the history of many of the classrooms [we visited].