The meeting of the G-20 this month in Pittsburgh is providing our region with what we in the education business like to call a teachable moment.

The lesson is that the pace of globalization continues unabated, despite the recession and the collapse last year of worldwide financial markets. The United States produces 30 percent of the world’s economic output, a commanding figure, but down from the 46 percent of the world’s economic output we produced at the end of World War II.

Half the world’s middle class resides in the developing world, nations we once referred to patronizingly as the Third World but which now represent the fastest growing financial and consumer markets. As a result, employers are increasingly looking for workers with international expertise and language skills because they know it makes their organizations more competitive in the marketplace.

None of this happened overnight, but judging from the statistics, those of us in higher education have not gotten the message to our students. Only 1.4 percent of American college students participate in study abroad programs each year, according to NAFSA: Association of International Educators. Pennsylvania has one of the highest study abroad rates, but with only 2.2 percent of the state’s students studying overseas, we have little reason to brag.

When I became president of Robert Morris University in 2005, one of my top priorities was to substantially increase our students’ international experiences, through greater opportunities for study abroad as well as adding a global perspective to the education students receive here. One way we’ve done this is to sign exchange agreements with universities in 11 nations, which allow RMU students to study at an overseas university for the same tuition they pay here, and vice versa.

Recognizing that our students all have different needs, based on their financial circumstances or the demands of their academic program, we offer a variety of short-term study abroad trips. Many of these, including trips to the Gambia and Ireland, are part of courses that include instruction at RMU’s Moon Township campus. These trips offer tremendous value. Studies conducted by the University of Delaware and the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities show that short-term study abroad trips improve students’ international expertise.

These trips, however, are not just about helping students build their resumes. These are life-changing events for our students, as you’ll read in the pages that follow. After I read nursing student Lee Folk’s journal entries from his trip this July to Nicaragua, one of which you can read on page 4, I knew that the best way to demonstrate the impact that international experiences have on students was to let the students tell you themselves. I hope that by the time you’ve finished reading that you are as proud of our students as I am.

Sincerely,

Gregory G. Dell'Omo, Ph.D.
When in Rome…

I began my journey at Robert Morris University in the Cooperative Education Program, while majoring in accounting. The co-op program allowed me to participate in an internship during my sophomore and senior years while earning credits towards my degree. Thanks to the program, I obtained an internship at Deloitte, one of the largest and most respected professional service firms in the world. While students from other schools were still trying to pick a major, I already had a foot in the door at a firm that BusinessWeek voted as “the number one place to launch your career.”

After completing my internship, I decided to take advantage of RMU’s study abroad program. This has proven to be the best experience of my life.

Prior to attending RMU, I had never ventured far from the friendly confines of my hometown, a small rural community in Washington County, Pa. But by the time I walked across the Sewall Center stage during commencement four years later, I had been to Rome, London, Paris, Prague, Athens, Dublin, and other European cities.

And I wasn’t just a tourist either; I actually lived and went to school in Rome. Doing so allowed me to observe and be a part of the unique culture of Italy, as well as gain invaluable experience that would assist me in both my future career path and my overall development as a well-rounded human being.

While in Rome, I took classes in Italian language, western civilization, marketing, and management. It was so cool learning all about the Roman Empire within view of the Colosseum and the Roman ruins, and the marketing and management classes helped me learn business principles from an Italian point of view. The cultural differences between American and Italians were highlighted and discussed in class.

It was a little hard getting used to Rome at first. Coming from a small town, it took some time to learn to keep up with the city’s fast-paced lifestyle. And there were other things too. First impressions are big in Italy. For example, if you are in a business setting, it can be a huge setback if you aren’t dressed appropriately and in the latest styles. At first I thought this was a shallow attitude. But I quickly realized that, if you want to be successful in the global marketplace, it’s important to learn about, understand, and embrace other cultures for what they are.

The experience I gained in Rome, combined with the professional experience I gained from my internship, provided me the skill-set I needed to succeed. Prior to completing my senior year at RMU, I was offered a full-time position at Deloitte Tax LLP. After only one year with the company, I was promoted twice, and I am now tax senior.

Working at a multinational firm such as Deloitte, I deal with colleagues and clients from many different cultural backgrounds. The opportunities I had at RMU taught me how to understand and embrace these differences. The knowledge and experience that I gained there has truly changed my life, and for that, I am forever grateful.
How do you begin to share a six-month, life-changing experience in a few short paragraphs? Going to Costa Rica through the RMU Honors Program was an amazing opportunity that I will never forget. I spent one semester studying at the University of Costa Rica, and then did an internship with a Christian missionary organization called SCORE International.

When I left for Costa Rica I did not know any Spanish. That presented challenges that many people never face, especially trying to be a college student in a country with an unfamiliar language. I lived with two host families during my time in Costa Rica, and from this experience I learned that communicating through actions is often more powerful than having the perfect words. I also learned to adjust to a different culture and a different lifestyle. My time in Costa Rica has helped me to be more relaxed in tense situations. Finally, I had the chance to discover how sharing cultural differences broadens our perspectives and makes us more well-rounded individuals.

While studying at the University of Costa Rica, I took a class called “Business Management in the Latin American Culture,” which taught us about the differences between the business culture in the United States and Latin America. The class was really interesting, because not only did we learn in the classroom, but also by visiting different companies, including Proctor & Gamble’s Costa Rican headquarters. That gave me a much better understanding of what it’s like for a U.S. company to enter the Latin American market.

I also got to visit the headquarters of Jack’s, which is the leading snack foods manufacturer in Costa Rica. They make corn chips, cheese puffs, caramel corn, cookies, even breakfast cereals. While at Jack’s I got a better understanding of what it is like for a Costa Rican corporation to operate, and we got a tour of the factory. This interactive learning opportunity both inside and outside of the classroom was a very valuable part of the semester.

During my internship with SCORE International, I worked with medical teams at clinics, gave food to the homeless, helped to provide clothes to poor communities, and translated for other groups that came down from the United States. I was glad to be part of a team working to give hope to those in desperate need of it. We spent time serving in some of the poor communities around the capital, San Jose, and I saw how people willing to lend a helping hand can really make a difference in people’s lives.

In Costa Rica I learned a lot about the business world, but more importantly, a lot about myself. Both the international office and the faculty at RMU gave me a lot of help and encouragement, and I would recommend studying abroad to any student. If I had not lived in Costa Rica, I would not be the person I am today. I am grateful to those who supported my endeavors, both directly and indirectly.
Another Day in Paradise

By Lee Folk, ’10

The rooster has become my alarm clock. Each day, around 6:30, its harsh cry shatters the early morning serenity. I always wake up cold. Dr. Carl Ross, the professor who heads up our trip, likes to see icicles on the AC unit by the time he wakes up. Since the maid of our hotel only gives us one sheet and one thin blanket per bed, I can barely feel my toes when it comes time to get up. Within minutes of leaving my room, though, I am sweating buckets in the Nicaraguan heat.

Before long, the rest of our crew emerges from their rooms. It is definitely not the typical Monday morning that we are used to. How many Mondays start out with a piping hot bowl of rice and beans? We eat quickly. Dr. Ross runs a pretty tight ship. Our driver, Don Pedro, has the van waiting for us outside, and by 7:30, we are headed toward the barrio to see our families.

Outside my window, Managua is wide awake. The humid intensity of the urban nightlife has been tamed by the rising sun and chased out by the soiled feet of the common man treading the streets in his ongoing search for daily bread. Most homes and shops we pass are constructed from sheets of rusty scrap metal, tied together with frayed rope and roofed with whatever scraps of covering the inhabitants can find. A strong wind could topple them easily. No wonder that deaths and damages are so great when natural disasters strike.

It seems that some people here do nothing but sit on their front stoop and watch cars go by. They wave at me when they catch my stare. Out in the intersections, there is the constant assault of peddlers. We drive over bridges that span nothing more than trenches of reeking garbage. They will flood when the rains come, creating rivers of filth for the children to wade through.

Advertisements are everywhere. They cover almost every flat surface. The leader in advertising, by far, is Coca-Cola. You cannot drive a city block without seeing a billboard, mural, or banner declaring the refreshment of the world’s most popular carbonated beverage.

Another popular advertisement is of Nicaraguan dictator Daniel Ortega. His face is plastered on hundreds of hot pink billboards, all of them proclaiming the prosperity that his government has brought to the people, despite the fact that his canvas likenesses stare out over a city lying stagnant in its deplorable poverty and economic decay. His promises are emptier than the stomachs of his starving constituents.

Don Pedro flips on the radio. I am surprised to hear the voice of Phil Collins come out of the speakers. Even in Nicaragua, there is Collins. Yet his lyrics turn out to be quite appropriate at the outset of my first clinical day in the barrio. I glance back at Dr. Ross behind me. His eyes are focused out the window, fixed on the passing blur of the Third World. The next line of the song says it all.

“It’s just another day for you, you and me in Paradise…”