

## **Intercultural Communicator Contributes to Best Practices in International Education from Kennesaw State University's Siegel Institute**

By Karen Pressley

(ATLANTA, Nov. 2009) - There are two things to which author, historian and former Georgia Board of Regents administrator Rick Sutton is professionally dedicated: continuing his lifelong pursuits as a researcher traveling the globe, and documenting his observations of study abroad programs where he explores cultural challenges and learning outcomes for American students. Sutton's thirty-year career is distinguished by award-winning research, writings, and administrative work, including the J.L. Loveless Award for Leadership in International Education in 1996, and the Georgia State University International Excellence Award in 2007.

Dr. Dorothy Zinsmeister, former Assistant Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs of the Georgia Board of Regents and the Interim Executive Director of Kennesaw State University's Siegel Institute for Leadership, Ethics & Character, invited Sutton to join the Institute in early 2009 as a Visiting Senior Research Fellow. "As a senior leader in the field of international education, Rick Sutton has a particular interest in the current debate about ethics, integrity, and best practices in the field that aligns with our Institute's role in servicing KSU," Dr. Zinsmeister said.

Dr. Sutton began his academic career as a Russian history professor after he earned his Ph.D. from Indiana University and his A.B. from Duke University. He landed in international education by way of his global travels, research fellowships and guest teaching spots at universities in Europe and Asia. His Fulbright fellowships took him to Germany in 1978-79 and to Japan in 2005. Additional research fellowships brought him to the University of Wales-Swansea, United Kingdom, and the University of Kiel, Germany. In between these academic appointments, his research projects also took him to the former Soviet Union at least five times from the 1970s to the 1980s, when he experienced the unique opportunity of observing the evolution of the modernization of Russia. Sutton's studies as an historian focused primarily on an angle of 19<sup>th</sup> century czarist history before the Russian revolution of 1917 that brought the Bolsheviks to power. "The 1860s was a very fertile period when the Russian government attempted to modernize itself with reform movements, reform efforts in leadership, and new

law codes and legal systems. I looked at what the government was doing in the judicial area, and how that played out in terms of criminal behavior and prosecutions in its modernization efforts. The country really grew up during the Cold War period, so I was drawn to get more understanding of Russian culture.”

Sutton’s interests in the modernization of Russia enabled him to also observe Russia’s relationships with American higher education institutions. He said that the path of a Russian history professor was not very open with job opportunities at the time he worked on his Ph.D., so he applied his global research experiences to opportunities to work as an administrator in international education. “I’ve always kept my base as a Russian historian, but my research interests have expanded to many places around the world. I’ve shifted to global higher education compared to how it is practiced in the U.S.,” Sutton said.

While American universities have long supported study-abroad programs to broaden and advance their undergraduate students’ experiences, his role as a Georgia Board of Regents administrator in international education caused him to query whether current policies and procedures for study-abroad programs in Georgia colleges and universities have kept up with the growth and global conditions affecting students. Dr. Sutton felt that educators have always “thought” study abroad programs were advantageous to students, but didn’t have the research needed to adequately support this assumption.

Sutton said that in early 2004, he accepted an opportunity to join his collaborator, Dr. Don Rubin, professor emeritus at University of Georgia, in the Georgia Learning Outcomes of Students Studying Abroad Research Initiative (“GLOSSARI”). A federal research project for the U.S. Department of Education on the impact of study abroad on American students, GLOSSARI engaged his interest because, “We need to do a better job of examining our processes so we have confidence in what we are promoting to students about study abroad, and in promoting international students to come to our campuses.”

Sutton and Rubin were primarily interested in whether the study abroad experience translated into noticeably improved academic performance upon return and higher graduation rates, especially for at-risk students (students with a GPA lower than 2.75). Sutton and Rubin published their first article, “The GLOSSARI Project: Initial Findings from a System-Wide

Research Initiative on Study Abroad Learning Outcomes,” in 2004. The article described their use of control groups to test whether students who go abroad have better life navigational and critical thinking skills than students who don’t go abroad. The team was careful to isolate factors that might be self-selecting to eliminate bias about bright kids who would have done well anyway. One key finding was that students who go abroad have higher academic performance as measured by their GPA and graduation rates. “It shows that students who are otherwise comparable in high school SAT scores or GPA and go abroad have higher college performance than if they don’t go abroad,” Sutton said. They also found that the impact of study abroad on these performance measures is greater for students with less robust academic preparation than for students who already have good academic measures coming into college. “We typically set a 3.0 GPA as a cutoff for allowing students to study abroad. We might think of lowering that, because the impact is greater on students with lower academic performance. Once they go abroad, they really get up to speed academically in demonstrative ways.” One interesting finding is that students who study abroad have ten percent higher odds of graduating in four years than students who only study domestically.

The GLOSSARI Project examined factors too numerous to mention in this paper, but of particular interest from an intercultural communication perspective is the use of different types of intercultural assessments to determine various learning outcomes and abilities gained: the Intercultural Learning Outcome (ILO), the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), and the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI). Some of the skills assessed include second language acquisition, global competence, better navigational skills in traveling, and knowledge of cultural contexts. Part of the ILO testing included a self-survey with questions that began with “I know how to...” that addressed knowing how to do things like: compare and contrast cultures; learn norms and taboos; locate information in the foreign country’s newspaper; buy toothpaste and a can opener; give coherent directions to others in their study abroad country; talk their way out of tough situations. The other assessments measured learning outcomes such as: knowing how different settings affect one’s style of interacting; understanding the significance of language and cultural differences; and knowing how cultural settings affect one’s own reactions and interactions to others. The researchers also looked at how teaching the

same course content (for example, “Napoleon and the French Revolution”) to American students studying abroad compared to being taught at home. They found that “the study abroad class was better able to conceptualize the ‘messiness’ of intercultural interactions and the true differences and similarities that exist across cultures in a more realistic manner due to immersion in the culture.” Sutton said that in Phase III of their case studies, they found that study abroad students “acquire better applied knowledge and better context of realism in interpreting course knowledge,” whereas students who only study domestically “acquire more fact detail and more knowledge of theory” than students who study abroad.

Sutton’s study abroad research has kept him busy writing and publishing his observations, including numerous articles, papers, and book chapters on interpreting the challenges of international education. In 2006, he co-authored a book chapter with Drs. Don Rubin and Ann Miller, “Research Design in Assessing Learning Outcomes of Education Abroad Programs,” for the publication, *A Guide to Outcomes Assessment in Education Abroad*. In May 2007, Sutton and Rubin delivered a presentation, “Changes That Occur Abroad: Measuring the Impact of Our Programs” at the Association of International Educators (NAFSA) Annual Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In June 2007, *Inside Higher Education* published a news story about study abroad issues, “So What Did You Learn in London?” which referenced Sutton’s work. Sutton published his opinion article: “Expanding Student Choices in Study Abroad” in the August 22, 2008 issue of *Inside Higher Education*. The Rubin-Sutton team recently completed the final phase of the GLOSSARI Project and delivered their findings to the U.S. Department of Education in Washington D.C. with their presentation, “Assessing Learning Outcomes of Study Abroad.”

Though Sutton’s presentations and guest teaching spots have led him to travel extensively, he nevertheless experienced culture shock in his frequent visits to Wales, London, Russia, Germany, and Japan. Though he said his experiences were likely no different than any visitor experiences when taking up an extended residence in a foreign country, “but the nature of my professional role as an international educator certainly made me more acutely aware and conscious of the cultural differences that confront any new arrival.” Sutton said that many challenges he faced while traveling were “mundane in simply understanding the mechanics of

how different societies operate, like how to order a taxi, where to buy bread or fish, and how to navigate public transportation.” He described other challenges as “much more complex, such as when to arrive at and leave from work consistent with local workplace rhythms; when and how to discuss controversial research findings that might challenge my hosts; how to decline invitations to events and behaviors that were inconsistent with my own values, things of that sort.” Sutton feels that every visitor in a new setting faces these kinds of issues. “The fact that I was a ‘professional international educator’ in these situations placed new expectations and obligations—both from me and my hosts—in dealing appropriately with them.”

When I asked him whether he was challenged by issues of ethnocentrism at any of the international universities, Sutton expressed that every society carries its own ethnocentric perspectives and traditions into its interactions with outsiders. “Russia, Germany, and Japan all have had unique and complex relationships with the U.S. over long periods of time that impact interpersonal communications and relationships.” He said that although he was not alive for most of the events that drove perspectives internationals may have shaped about the U.S., he was “repeatedly expected to explain why the U.S. chose to pursue policies and strategies toward those nations, even though they may have occurred many decades ago.” While he didn’t elaborate on the subtle ways he said those conflicts continued to express themselves in contemporary daily life, he did say, “Much of the ethnocentrism that I experienced during these many residences abroad stemmed from the deep-seated misunderstandings and distrust that had taken those countries so long to develop and entrench.”

As the Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Siegel Institute, Sutton continues to pursue his interest in ethical challenges of international education. One of his goals is to convene a dialogue among international educators around the U.S. and the world, whether through a blog, conference, series of publications, or a special journal issue. “I’m more concerned about launching the conversation than the delivery mechanism,” Sutton said. “There’s lots of talk going on about best practices that we want to make public, so we can all benefit from it.”

Sutton and Rubin are currently directing replication studies following the completing of the GLOSSARI project, on the impact of study abroad on student learning outcomes and on academic performance indicators which include leadership and character metrics. Sutton said a

number of universities, beginning with the University of San Diego, have expressed interest in testing their methodology as a validity check, so Sutton and Rubin are continuing, and accelerating, that research. He also plans to initiate a forum to explore ethical challenges in international education.

On November 10, 2009, the Center for Excellence and Teaching, the Siegel Institute for Leadership, Ethics & Character, and the Institute for Global Initiatives of Kennesaw State University are hosting Drs. Sutton and Rubin to give their presentation, "Documenting the Academic Impact of Study Abroad: Final Report of the GLOSSARI Project." As KSU maintains an active study abroad program, he hopes that his research and findings will benefit the campus' investments in their continuing programs.

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