

FIU graduate students going international

BY BRIAN BANDELL

Ordering merchandise from China always required a middle-man for Larry Speaker, director of sales and marketing at Fort Lauderdale-based Stuart Cove's Dive Bahamas. Then he went to

China for his Florida International University executive MBA program and found a factory he can order baseball hats from directly.

The possible cost savings and the experience were worth the trip, he said.

Getting out of your comfort zone and learning how business is done over there is a really important part of the program, Speaker said.

Mandatory trips

FIU made international trips mandatory for its executive MBA students, starting with its winter 2004 class.

It is the only such program in South Florida with mandatory trips, said interim director Sarah Perez. Many of the top national executive MBA programs have mandatory international trips, she said.

The trips take place at about the 10th month of the 18-month program, during a session on international business. The coursework includes case studies on some of the companies the students will meet with overseas.

The Pembroke Pines campus' spring 2004 class will travel to China and Hong Kong. The University Park campus' fall class will tour India. The trips are between 10 and 12 days.

"Most of our people are very familiar with Latin America and somewhat familiar with

Europe, but they're unfamiliar with what's happening in the Far East," said José de la Torre, dean of FIU's Graduate School.

The school wants students to focus on emerging markets and outsourcing, he said.

Studying those markets helped four former FIU students form Miami-based Strategia Consulting Group. They are working with Broward County to secure a more than \$50 million deal with a Shanghai company to attract a free trade zone mixed-use center for Chinese goods.

Their class' trip to China was canceled because of SARS, among other issues, but Strategia CEO Slenda Chan took several of her classmates to China anyway.

"You need to experience those outsourcing capitals," she said. "It's definitely worth a visit to know what's going on there."

The students formed the company after meeting in the class.

More accessible

Making the trip mandatory, instead of optional as it was before, makes it more accessible to the students, said Strategia CFO Rene Atlamirano. Some companies weren't willing to cover an optional international trip, but incorporating a mandatory trip should ensure everyone participates, he said.

Only the travel costs aren't included in the \$42,000 tuition.

The university has opened the international trips to former FIU executive MBA graduates, as well.

The trips include meetings with native businesses, financial institutions, government and American companies that do business overseas. There's also a little sightseeing involved.

"We want our students to see it firsthand, not just learn about it in a classroom," Perez said.

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MARK FREERKS

Sarah Perez and Jose de la Torre take FIU's executive MBA students globetrotting.