WSU students go abroad to acquire global business skills

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Rather than learn about international business strictly from books, 13 Wichita State University students are experiencing it firsthand.

They returned Sunday from Malaysia as part of a project they're doing for Spirit AeroSystems.

The students are in a program at WSU called the Barton International Group, which was formed last year to help prepare students to participate in a global society.

"We started asking ourselves... what do we have to do to prepare our students for the next 10 or 20 years," said Kate Kung-McIntyre, assistant dean at the Barton School of Business.

Rather than offering summer courses overseas, Kung-McIntyre came up with the idea of an enterprise for undergraduate students to perform international work for companies, Hensler said.

"We want our graduates to be innovative, entrepreneurial, international, lifelong leaders," said Doug Hensler, dean of WSU's Barton School of Business.

Spirit is sponsoring the first project. Three more companies have expressed interest, Hensler said.

For Spirit, students are studying how it can best develop a global culture that's inclusive of its employees in other parts of the world.

Converging cultures is one of the things companies tend to do last, said Spirit corporate public affairs manager Brian Black.

As Spirit expands, it's an increasingly important issue.

"You can't just say this is Wichita, and this is how you do it," Black said.
Melding cultures is more than posting core values on a wall. It has to be adapted to local culture.

"How is that being played out in that particular business setting; how is it interpreted; how is it being discussed?" Black said.

The students say they realize Spirit could have hired a professional management consulting company to do the work.

"We are very proud that they were willing to take the risk and allow 13 undergraduate students to do it instead," said WSU senior Tim Wilson, who was on the trip.

The students are basing their research on a management model called the 7-S Framework of McKinsey.

It describes seven factors to use to organize a company — structure, systems, style, staff, skills, strategy and shared values.

In Malaysia, students toured the Spirit factory, met with workers from the top leadership to the cafeteria staff, held focus groups and shadowed employees.

Each evening, they reported and documented their observations.

They put in 12- to 15-hour days.

One of the biggest surprises was how quickly they made friends with the workers.

They thought it would be difficult to connect because of the different cultures, Kung-McIntyre said.

They learned how to travel internationally and about differences in culture and language.

They also saw connections between classroom learning and real situations, she said.

Now that they're back, the group will meet twice a week for the final analysis and to formulate specific recommendations, Kung-McIntyre said.

"The biggest challenge is making sure that we provide Spirit with a deliverable that they will be able to use," Wilson said.

They'll present their findings to Spirit CEO Jeff Turner in August.

The partnership with Spirit is an ongoing one.

"Being in Malaysia is only the first part of it," Wilson said.