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In last month’s newsletter, I reflected on the human costs of our frequent inability as individuals, groups, and even whole nations to talk successfully with others we see as “different.” Now, I want to shift my focus and highlight the very positive outcomes that successful connections across differences make possible. My frame is global, and it centers on the rapidly proliferating connections that allow us to learn from global neighbors who are “best in class.”

Here’s an example of how these learning opportunities are benefitting North Carolina. Back in 2013, our Emerging Issues Forum highlighted advanced manufacturing as a key growth opportunity for North Carolina. After the Forum, IEI convened 15 community meetings across the state to help local stakeholders better align workforce development programs with the needs of local manufacturers. Economic development officials, community college officers, workforce trainers, and employers forged important new collaborations that promised to strengthen local economies. (IEI’s Manufacturing Toolkit enabled this process, which we summarized in our Manufacturing Report.)

As these initiatives were taking shape, it became clear that North Carolina’s communities needed to better understand global best practices in manufacturing workforce development. IEI responded to this need by partnering with the Center for International Understanding on CIU’s Global Leaders: Germany 2014 travel learning program. By supporting the participation of six community leaders from Chatham and Catawba counties, IEI offered these local leaders the opportunity to join a larger group for an intensive firsthand look at Germany’s successful workforce development model in the area of advanced manufacturing. The full group included members of the North Carolina General Assembly, NC Department of Commerce staff, economic development professionals, and educators and academic program officers from public schools, community colleges, and universities.
The group conferred with German hosts at locations including:

- Schletter GmbH, which specializes in solar mounting systems and has its U.S. headquarters in Shelby, NC;
- BMW’s facility in Munich, where the automaker provides hands-on student training in partnership with local vocational schools;
- Fraunhofer Institutes, an innovative public-private partnership where educators and industry work together in pursuit of breakthrough innovations; and
- Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University, a leader in dual-education programs involving advanced manufacturing partners.

CIU study trip participants pause in front of the Reichstag for a picture and break from lugging their knapsacks.

The trip allowed North Carolina leaders to learn, and it will benefit students across the state. As Pam Senegal, Central Carolina Community College’s VP for economic and community development, explained on her return from Germany, the visit helped Chatham County leaders refine plans for apprenticeship programs and training offerings. “Seeing firsthand how proud students were to be a part of the apprenticeship and dual education program in Germany inspired our Chatham team to find a way to match that enthusiasm so that we will be well positioned to provide an automotive manufacturer with the pipeline of talent they will need when they locate a facility in this region.”

NC State students are likely to share the enthusiasm of Chatham County students about the breadth of workplace learning opportunities that may be created through
partnerships. “The trip gave me a much more detailed and realistic feel for how the public and private sector work closely together,” said Mark Nance, an associate professor of public and international affairs at NC State. “These are concepts that I can convey to my students when talking about the challenges and opportunities of a globalizing political economy.”

I’m excited about the continuing post-Forum work in manufacturing, but I close with an unrelated request for a special favor. As we bear in mind the special gifts of our young adults, please help IEI reach our state’s most globally-connected young people with news of our 2015 High School Prize for Innovation and our 2015 SECU Emerging Issues Prize for Innovation for college/graduate students. All of our prizes, including the $50,000 top prize, aim to inspire young minds to tackle important challenges facing our state. As was true for the learners and leaders in Germany, we hope to see and set global best practices with the prize-winning ideas for social innovation. Please share these announcements with your networks.

Warmly, Anita

P.S. When IEI announces our 2015 Emerging Issues Forum theme early next month, you’ll see that we’re thinking hard about learning and leading in an era of accelerating global connections! Stay tuned.