Evangelicals in Brazil and at Gordon: An unlikely partnership?

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Coffee and sunshine. What’s not to love? During February classes at Gordon, three of us left the knee-deep snow to travel to sunny Brazil, source of most of the world’s coffee. While there, in Sao Paulo, President Lindsay met with pastors, a deputy ambassador, business leaders, and potential students, and preached a sermon. His message never wavered. He represented Gordon well in the nonstop challenges of travel crises (and more crises), meeting new people, establishing relationships with pastors, academics, and lay people, and enticing potential students to Gordon. Meanwhile, Gordon Global Education staffer Caroline―who knows more than most of us will ever know about visas, Christian higher education, Gordon’s strengths, and the stresses of travel―kept us on schedule and in good spirits. Meanwhile I recruited potential partners for Gordon and a grant I’m writing—and drank a lot of cappuccinos. You might wonder: why invest all this energy into partnership with a region that most of us have not visited? Sure, the coffee and weather are nice, and the people are lovely, but why.

Sao Paulo is a beautiful, crowded, economically thriving city in a country which values education. And yet the country spends enormous amounts of money for apparently little educational effect. At the same time, many of its people love America, the East Coast, Disneyworld—and God.

Brazil has been called the “heartland of Christianity”. It has the largest community of Catholics and of Pentecostals in the world, and the second largest community of Protestants. It is a region of high religious belief and practice, and traditional values. It is a country which is historically overwhelmingly Catholic. Yet currently at least 20% or more of the population are Evangelicals, and these numbers are growing. Brazil seems uniquely positioned to send able students to Gordon who have a desire to learn and a solid Christian faith. These students can contribute to and learning from the education that Gordon offers―and strengthen our excellent soccer teams in the process.

While in Sao Paulo, I met students like Daniel and Ruben, identical twins who have largely been homeschooled and are serious and excited about learning in a Christian environment. At 15, they are graduating high school and interested in Gordon’s summer leadership program Elevate. And I spent an hour with Asafe, an accepted student at Gordon through the Science without Borders program whose social skills and desire to learn currently outstrip his knowledge of English (but who will learn quickly). In many ways, they seemed very much like current Gordon students, with generous hearts and eager minds, and with much to offer and much to give.

I also met potential academic partners for Gordon, all of whom were capable Evangelicals. I was warmly received by Pastor Hilder Stutz, and by anthropologist Suzana Coutinho, religious studies specialist Rodrigo de Sousa, and sociologist Leonilda Campos. By listing their names this way, it sounds as if everything went like clockwork, but the traffic in Sao Paulo is grim, and my visit with Leonilda was therefore notable for its intensity and brevity. In contrast, for example, I enjoyed long conversations with Pastor Hilder, who is a bright, energetic, well-informed former businessman, and with Rodrigo, both of whom quickly felt like friends. With their encouragement and engagement, I now feel able to proceed with more specific plans for international professional collaboration.

Gordon provides a unique education that helps students from thoughtful backgrounds to grow in wisdom, knowledge, and faith. We have always had an international focus but it is nevertheless good to be reminded how large God’s world is, how much we learn by caring for others, and how much they offer us. Sometimes it feels isolating to be a Christian in the Northeast, and it is therefore even more surprising to find partners in southeast Brazil. Having now learned how generous people can be in Brazil, I’m inspired to go back. Perhaps I’ll even learn some Portuguese. Until then, I look forward to seeing individuals like Asafe and Rodrigo, Daniel and Ruben, in the halls of Gordon College.