Building Bridges with Central Asia: Social Welfare Professor Expands Community of Scholars

Social Welfare Associate Professor Terry Koenig’s Fulbright project began four years ago when she first met several Kazakhstani students at the University of Kansas who were recipients of Kazakhstan’s Bolashak International Scholarship Award.

During the past year and with Russian language translation support from Aisulu Akhmediyarova, a Kazakhstani graduate of KU’s School of Social Welfare, Koenig was also able to develop professional relationships with Kazakhstani faculty members from Eurasian National University in Astana and El-Farabi Kazakh National University in Almaty.

Through interactions with faculty in the KU Center for Russian, Eastern European and Eurasian studies, Koenig discovered that the Soros Foundation sponsors many Central Asian social work scholars. She explored the possibility of testing her preliminary semistructured interview guide with these scholars so that their feedback would help hone her qualitative research project for the Fulbright. This connection proved meaningful. In spring 2010 Koenig conducted interviews with five Soros scholars from Central Asia working on their social work graduate degrees at Washington University in St. Louis. Their feedback also helped shape her proposed Fulbright qualitative study.

Kazakhstan, Social Work, and Social Policy Development

As a Fulbright scholar to Kazakhstan, Koenig hopes to teach cross-cultural social policy in the Social Work Department at Eurasian National University in Astana, the capital city, and conduct a qualitative research study that examines the current and future role of Kazakhstani social work and social policy development. Kazakhstan, as a post-Soviet country, is in the beginning stages of creating social policies and social programs. Social workers and professionals in related disciplines are ideally suited to take on leadership roles in designing and managing these policies and programs. Eurasian National University wants to make her social policy course available to a multidisciplinary group of students, practitioners, faculty, community leaders, and others.

Through teaching this course, Koenig hopes to help create a “community of scholars,” bound by a common purpose and whose discussions and social policy planning will continue long after she leaves Kazakhstan. Further, her research study would include the perspectives of social work students, faculty, and other professionals regarding the development of social services and policies in Kazakhstan. Study results could be useful for Kazakhstani and other Central Asian policymakers as they examine their countries’ definitions and understandings of social problems and possible solutions.

This project advances her own work on professional ethical decision-making and Eastern philosophy in that it allows Koenig to closely examine the impact of diverse cultural norms and values on the development of social work and related disciplines. Koenig also expects that this Fulbright project will enhance her sensitivity to cultural diversity, thereby encouraging her students to explore and become increasingly aware of the lives of people who are different from themselves.