

Local hospitality and tourism program has international reach

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Niagara College was one of seven Canadian colleges celebrated this week for its involvement with an education project in Brazil geared to training underprivileged women.

Called Mulheres Mil, which means "1,000 women" in Portuguese, the project was launched in 2007. It aims to help women in remote areas of Brazil who have little formal education, accepting them into vocational programs and equipping them with skills to work in local industries or to develop small businesses. Run by the Association of Canadian Community Colleges, the program is financially supported by funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Brazilian government.

The Canadian colleges partnered with 12 technological institutes in Brazil to help implement the project. With each institution focusing on a specific sector such as fashion and handicrafts, fishery, culinary and food processing, Niagara College drew on its expertise in the tourism and hospitality industry.

"This sector was chosen by the Brazilians because they have important tourism cities in the northeast of the country and the hotels are always looking for skilled workers, while there is also high unemployment," said Jos Nolle, chair of international development at Niagara College.

Nolle has been involved in efforts in Brazil for more than 20 years. He worked for Doctors without Borders in Brazil from 1988 to 1995, and participated in several Association of Canadian Community Colleges initiatives after he joined Niagara College in 1995.

He and Niagara College director of leadership and innovation Marti Jurmain were lead consultants for Mulheres Mil and wrote the original project proposal submitted by colleges association to CIDA.

Once the wheels were in motion, four staff members from Niagara College participated in delivering training courses to Brazilian teachers who, in turn, designed and delivered the courses for underprivileged women in 13 cities of northeast Brazil.

While Niagara College has numerous international development projects dealing with social inclusion and workforce development, Nolle said this project is unique because of its focus on women.

"It is heartbreaking to see the circumstances some of the women live under," he said.

"The Brazilian colleagues are amazing and they work very hard to do something about the economic inequalities."

Nolle said he was proud to have been able to start up this program and see the results so far.

"About 80% completed their training programs, which, under the challenging circumstances these women live, is very good," he said.

"About 20% of the trained women found formal employment after the training, which again is very high considering the bias against women from these socially underprivileged groups of the population."

With the four-year pilot project coming to an end this month, Nolle is currently in Brazil completing evaluations of the program with representatives from CIDA.

The program has been so successful, however, that the government of Brazil has decided to take it on as a national life-skills education program. In Brazil, the project has inspired a documentary and a book of stories about 40 of the trained women, Nolle said.

Nolle said he hopes to follow up with a research project to see what happens to the participants who were trained during the past four years and will be part of the ongoing national program.

The project is also being discussed as a model for use in Mozambique.

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