

Hotel Hotspot

By Mark Gordon | Deputy Managing Editor - Friday, May 02, 2014

Turkish native and University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee administrator Cihan Cobanoglu has been on eclectic worldwide field trip lately, with stops from Taiwan to Tunisia and Germany to Peru.

The main purpose of the journeys is to recruit students for USFSM. But Cobanoglu, dean of the College of Hospitality and Technology Leadership at USF Sarasota-Manatee, aims to do more than pad the school's student enrollment. A onetime hotel manager at properties in Istanbul and London, Cobanoglu, pronounced Jeehan Cho-ban-o-loo, also wants to ensure USF hospitality students get a global hospitality education.

Study aboard programs are valuable, Cobanoglu says, but can be cost-prohibitive for many students. So Cobanoglu will instead import the education by bringing in students from other places. Those students will then share their experiences with American students. "Every business has a global part right now and hospitality is no exception," Cobanoglu says. "Everything is targeted to give our students a global culture."

That student base in the hospitality program is on the upswing: Enrollment has increased 95.4% in the last three years, from 87 students to 170, the school says, and another 40 students are in a hospitality master's degree program that began in 2011. The hospitality program will also pick up more students this fall, when it debuts classes at USF's main campus in Tampa.

Part of the increase, school officials say, stems from the explosion in tourism statewide, which has led to more job opportunities. "I want our students to be hospitality leaders, to be the next GM of the Ritz-Carlton or the Hyatt," Cobanoglu says. "We want our leaders to be bold and have ideas to make (the industry) faster and more efficient."

Some Sarasota-Manatee hospitality executives have noticed the quality of the USF hospitality program, including Matt Owens, human resources director at the Ritz-Carlton, Sarasota. The hotel and its connected properties, with around 500 employees, have about 10 current USFSM hospitality majors on the payroll. All the students are enrolled in the full Ritz-Carlton training program. "These students want to make a career out of it," Owens says, "so they perform at a very high level."

That was the idea when USF professor and hospitality industry veteran Jay Schrock founded the program, the first USF school formed outside of the main Tampa campus. Cobanoglu took over for Schrock, who retired but remains a faculty member with the school, in 2011. Cobanoglu previously worked in the hotel industry in Istanbul and London, global tourist locales with a combined population of nearly 25 million people.

He also worked in Stillwater, Okla., with a total population of around 40,000. That was his first stop in the States, when he earned his Ph.D. at Oklahoma State University, in 2001. He later spent three years teaching at

the University of Delaware in Newark, another small college town. Those stops, says Cobanoglu, were somewhat of a cultural shock, but it helped him form his ideas to bring a global hospitality perspective to USF.

“I am an example of the American Dream,” says Cobanoglu. “America not only gave me a passport and citizenship, but a chance to teach students.”

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