

Furman group sees Vietnam's strengths, challenges at summit

Development impressive, but poverty a problem, students say

A Furman University professor and five students have seen first-hand how much Vietnam wants to host foreign investment.

Brent Nelsen, chair of Furman's political science department, and students Kristen Capograssi, Daniella Fergusson, Webb McArthur, Ke Ji and Cindy Youssef recently spent a week in Hanoi representing the United States at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation conference.

APEC facilitates bilateral trade and investment. Its signature event is an annual summit hosted by an APEC member nation.

Youssef, a senior political science and Latin American studies major from Greenville, said, "Vietnam was very welcoming to us."

Students ate dinner with business leaders from Singapore, China, Peru and other countries wanting their businesses to invest in Vietnam.

And, Nelsen said, "We really did get a view of the new Vietnam.

"It's still a communist political system, but it's more and more an open market, a free market economy pretty much on the Chinese model."

The Furman group visited a Japanese factory in Vietnam where mainly young women were working on an assembly line on robotics.

Nelsen described the new Vietnam as "very, very poor," but possessing a very educated population. He said 97 percent of Vietnamese are literate, and that the population is about 84 million, "so there is a very huge work force there that will work for very low wages."

Youssef said just a view of the country from their airplane revealed how globalization has not yet reached that country.

"You have a section of 20 to 30 homes and then you have nothing but rice paddies for miles and miles," she said.

McArthur said one of the things that surprised him was Vietnam's work ethic. Even in the very early morning, people were bustling out on the streets.

Nelsen was particularly struck by how in Asia, "the future is more important than the present, and they're moving very fast to the future."

To keep up, the United States must straighten out its trade relations with other countries, solve its energy and environmental problems and boost education, Nelsen said.

By Angelia Davis