

Washington: The Embassy promotes Italian Universities

WASHINGTON. It isn't just an unforgettable life experience. For Americans today, studying in Italy is also an opportunity to specialize in the ever-growing number of unique experiences that Italy has to offer. What is missing, however, is an approach which is aimed at welcoming students as well as opening a dialogue with universities overseas. The AIEA (Association of International Education Administrators) voiced this need yesterday after meeting with international administrators and professors from some of the most important Italian universities. This meeting marked the first of an executive committee and was hosted and organized by the Embassy of Italy in Washington D.C.

This is a new role for the Embassy, which proposes itself as a cultural reference point in order to further develop and take advantage of all of the opportunities this field has to offer, Ambassador Gianni Castellaneta stated in his inaugural speech to the newly formed committee. "There is a feeling of friendship towards our country, and we would like to translate this friendship into a concrete collaboration," stated Ambassador Castellaneta, "Italy is not only the country of art and fashion, but also of new technologies and specialized studies. Over 25,000 American students come to Italy every year, which is a considerable number but which nevertheless is not proportionate to the potential which our university system possesses. There is room for growth in these numbers including the potential for expansion in our national territory." Yesterday's meeting began straight away in the name of concrete approaches as the American administrators voiced what they believed was missing in the Italy's student welcome and orientation. At the top of the list was the need for integration: the student who arrives in Italy often does not speak Italian and it is therefore necessary to offer linguistic support. There is also a need for practical assistance such as the kind that would be required to help the student find lodging or to resolve bureaucratic issues which may arise. AIEA noted that such an office for foreign students is not available in all faculties and even when there is one, at times it ignores the true needs of the arriving students. Italy is second only to Great Britain as a destination for foreign study programs by American students, with 25,000 American students choosing to travel to Italy each year. This being the case, the newly formed committee seized an important opportunity to create a dialogue. "It is a historic turning point," according to Uliana Gabara, President of the AIEA. "We have never witnessed this caliber of interest on the part of an embassy. A fundamental process to better bilateral relations has been set into motion today."

On the Italian side, the AIEA's call for a meeting and collaboration is viewed favorably and is considered an invaluable opportunity. For Michele Calvi of the University of Pavia, the main problem is an organizational one: "Those who know what they are looking for come to Italy because they know they will find it, especially at the highest university level. However, those who arrive cannot be left alone." According to Carla Locatelli, Vice President of the University of Trento, the initiated dialogue allows for "an efficient panoramic view of the Italian university system as a study abroad destination which is not merely a pleasant recreational experience. It pleases us to know that the Americans have understood this and that they are projecting an incisive image of us abroad."

Those students who choose to study in Italy for a semester, or even less, become "ambassadors" of an Italy as it is today. According to Vincenzo Grasso of Eduitalia, an agency which deals with welcoming and orienting foreign students, "They go back to the United States and recognize our products. They know what "Made in Italy" means and they speak the language. They are a resource which is not to be underestimated." It has been calculated that an American student studying in Italy spends on average 50,000 Euro per year.