

An interview with Professor James McCollum, an outstanding promoter of international educational cooperation

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Motto: "God is my co-pilot"

Professor James K. McCollum is an outstanding promoter of international educational cooperation. He is author of "Romania. Opening All of the Doors. A travelogue of the Transition" (published by McTara Publishing Company in Association with Trafford Publishing, printed in Canada, 2003), dedicated to his "life partner, Barbara". James K. McCollum, Alabama University in Huntsville, USA, and Ana-Maria Preda, Romanian-American University have written a wonderful book of Applied Business Management, inviting students to develop skills by interacting with real-life business applications, by learning to design and implement action plans to address management challenges. The main objective of the book was to help students in identifying the strategic business opportunities, as well as in learning to recognize and capitalize on them, in learning to separate business requirements and analysis and to couple training with new experiences.

Question 1. You seem to have had a very satisfying career in academia. How do you account for your success?

Answer: I mainly focused on research and writing. I have seen many talented professors that neglected this aspect of an academic career that failed to get promotion and tenure. High quality teaching is also required, but in American universities, it must be accompanied by a solid base of research and publication of journal articles.

Question 2. Has your success been easily attained?

Answer: No. I look back on my life from my advanced age and remember many struggles I have had to get to where I am now. Where I am is very satisfying to me, but it's not a life of riches and luxury. I am in a second career. My original career was in the U.S. Army and I was fortunate enough to stay in the Army for 20 years which is the lowest threshold for an army retirement. The retirement gave me a base to go into academia which I have found to be richly rewarding in "psychic" income, but not giving me availability to live in a mansion or to drive a Cadillac or Mercedes. I probably could have these things, but I would feel inwardly that I have just squandered money on status symbols that do not give me peace of mind and soul.

Question 3. You say you have struggled, but from what we know, you graduated from West Point, the most prestigious military academy in the world, became an Army Officer, and spent two years in Vietnam. Weren't these achievements satisfying to you?

Answer: Yes and no. After high school, I went to the University of Missouri for a year with my parents struggling to pay for my schooling. At that point, I decided to enter the Army to get some Korean War “GI Bill” benefits for future schooling. I entered as a Private and while on a ship for a tour of duty in Germany, I met a young soldier, Charles McLendon, who had just been terminated from the Officer Candidate School (OCS) at Ft. Benning, Georgia. I told him I would like to become an army officer. He argued against applying for OCS, but rather to get an appointment to West Point through the Army. I had never heard of such a program for getting into West Point, nor had my new commanding officer in Germany when I said I’d like to go to West Point through the army. The commander, a Lieutenant Colonel, said he would look into it for me. Sure enough, a few weeks later, he sent me to his Personnel Officer who had done the research and said he was sending me to a testing center at another army base to see if I could qualify for the appointment. Everything worked out for me to be sent to the army’s preparatory school at Stewart Air Force Base, Newburgh, New York. I went there for a year and was one of the 30 out of 150 who passed all of the requirements and was able to enter West Point in 1956. Looking back, I see the Hand of God in having me meet Charles McLendon, getting support from my commander.

Question 4. Weren’t you were on your way to success at that point?

Answer: Partly. At the end of my first year which is the most rigorous and trying, we went for summer training. I injured my left knee in the field training and thought my army career was over. After recovery from a primitive (by today’s standards) operation, I was able function, but never as effectively as before and was able to complete the four years and get commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Field Artillery. I even went through Airborne training to become a parachutist and spend four years in Airborne assignments and became a Master Parachutist. But much of it was done mainly on one leg. I spent the two assignments in Vietnam in interesting positions, first, in 1965-66 as the Battery Commander of a 175mm Gun Battery and second from January to December of 1970 as the Operations Advisor to the Army of Vietnam Airborne Division.

Question 5. What about your private life? We understand you just celebrated your 50th Wedding Anniversary.

Answer: Again, I give God the credit for bringing me to the love of my life. I don’t want to bore you, but I think you’ll better understand why I give God so much credit. The day was March 17, 1956, the day we finished taking the West Point Entrance exam. I went to downtown Newburgh, NY to have dinner with a prep school friend, George Hunter. As we walked through the snow on the way to restaurant, a car driven by Rod Mclain, another prep schooler, stopped and Rod asked if one of us want to go to New Platz, a nearby college town. I urged George to go, but he said he was tired and didn’t want to go. I went with the others and that night, met Barbara, my life partner. She comforted me through the rigors of West Point and we got married on graduation day, June 8, 1960

Question 6. *You also have children, do you not?*

Answer: Yes, we have four children: Deanna is a nurse, Jennifer is an elementary school teacher. James jr. is a Major in the Army, and Michael, is a home builder. From them, we have 12 grandchildren.

Question 7. *How did you get into academia after the army?*

Answer: I retired from the army at age 39. Many retired army officers go into defense related businesses and have very lucrative second careers, but I had no desire for that line of work. While still in the army, I had gotten masters degrees in political science and in public administration. I had two assignments as an instructor in army schools, so I definitely wanted to get a Ph.D. and teach in a university. Just before I retired from the army I met a Colonel in the Army Reserve who was also the Dean of the College of Business at Virginia Polytechnic and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia. He invited me to enroll in the Ph.D. program at his university. It was a wonderful connection and five years after retirement from the army, I was a Ph.D. in Business Management. Again, God was my co-pilot and guided my career into a satisfying life of college teaching, research, and publication. At first, I was at Auburn University, then at The University of Alabama at Huntsville, both of which are “publish or perish” institutions. I’m still around, so I didn’t perish.

Question 8. *How did you come to Romania?*

Answer: It was, in my opinion, a result of my successful publishing that allowed me to get two Fulbright Scholarships (1991-92 and 2003-05) and a Fulbright Senior Specialist award to Romania. Barbara and I came to Romania together for the first two Fulbrights. I also was brought to the Lucian Blaga University in Sibiu in 1996 as a Visiting Professor. After the first Fulbright, I got grants from the U.S. Information Agency to bring 53 Romanian middle managers to Huntsville to work in our local companies as interns to learn about free market management. These grants required that I come to Romania to select the managers to participate in the program. Subsequent to the Intern program, we had three reunions with the interns, 1997, 2000, and 2002, and found that the interns’ careers were going very well.

Question 9. *How did you become affiliated with RAU?*

Answer: That connection began during the first Fulbright. Dr. Smedescu asked someone at the U.S. Embassy if I could come and give some lectures at his one year old university. I was happy to comply and gave my first RAU lecture about March of 1992. I didn’t have any direct connections with RAU until 2004 when I was teaching for ASE and a reporter for *Economistul* interviewed me. The interviewer knew that my wife and I had taught classes at the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG) at Blagoevgrad. The interviewer asked why Romania didn’t have an American University. I answered that there is an American university here, but it is not as well developed as AUBG. Dr. Smedescu saw the interview, contacted me, and sent a car to take me to his new campus. I was bowled over to see the fine buildings he had created for RAU. When I met him, he wanted to know why I had said RAU didn’t have good facilities. I could only say I didn’t know what wonders had occurred since 1992 for his university. Then, without rancor, he said, “I want you to come and teach for me.” Again, I was happy to comply and in the

autumn of 2004, I came to RAU to teach a short course and have been coming back to teach courses in winter and fall to teach short courses and to bring students from my university for summer study abroad courses. The summer courses began in 2005 I had recruited 2 students for the Black Sea University (BSU) and when BSU couldn't offer a meaningful program, Dr. Preda, (then Decan Preda) offered to begin a summer program and recruited ten RAU students to go along with my two American students to begin a Summer Study Abroad program that continues to this day. So far, we have had 48 American students and 35 RAU students in this program. All of the American students and (I think) all of the Romanian students have been wildly enthusiastic about this program that is mainly taught by RAU professors and includes cultural activities which include tours in Bucharest and Transilvania every year and trips to the Black Sea as either optional or part of the main program.

Question 10. We understand you have written some books since coming to Romania for the first time. Is that true?

Answer: I'm happy to say that it is. I had written a lot of journal articles and meeting papers before I came to Romania, but I had always desired to write some books. The opportunity seemed to demand that I take some action since I didn't see any management books that I thought were the best for teaching free market management when I was in Romania the first time, so I began a book I called *American Ideas for Romanian Managers*, written in English, but thus not very practical for teaching Romanian students in that form. God blessed me again with the help of my most used translator when I gave lectures to Romanian managers, Mrs. Doina Virginia Vladuca. She offered to translate the book for me into Romanian, so in December, 1993, I made a special trip to Bucharest to get the book translated into Romanian. Mrs. Vladuca did a fine job of translating the book and I used it the next summer at the Black Sea University and gave copies to all of my interns who came to the U.S.

At Mrs. Vladuca's suggestion, I wrote another book named *Is Communism Dead forever?* using Mrs. Vladuca's life under communism as a case study/centerpiece. That book has been used mainly in preparing American students for coming to Romania. It has found a place on the shelves of many libraries in America also.

Using many of my diary note of my travels in Romania, I wrote a book entitled, *Romania Opening All of the Doors*, that was published in 2003. In 2004, while I was teaching for ASE, I added a few cases and had a 2d edition of *Idei Americane pentru Manageri Romani* published by Editura ASE. Most recently, Dr. Ana-Maria Preda and I revised the book and added more cases, and we renamed the book, *Applied Business Management* and it was published, in English, by Editura Universitara. I've been able to use the new book in classes at RAU this year.

Earlier, I had found another partner, Cristian Silviu Banacu, who taught Project Management among other subjects at ASE, and we coauthored a book, *Project Management: A Practical Approach*, also published by Editura Universitara, which has been used at the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest and at Romanian-American University. Both of the latter books rely heavily on the use of cases and the Romanian students like this approach very much.

Question 11: Coming back to WestPoint Academy, do you think that WestPoint Academy and the years you've spent serving in the US Army helped you in your future business career, and especially as a Project Manager?

Answer: I did get a lot of project management experience while I was in the army and again in my intern program and smaller projects in academia.

Question 12: Coming back to Project "Romania", despite the global economic crisis, which paradoxical gathers together the whole Planet, you are back in Romania and this confirms that we are present at a Cultural Management. Can you tell us about your involvement in this process (through your books, and not only)?

Answer: We try to keep our cultural programs going despite the financial crisis. So far, we have been able to attract some students, though not as many, to the study abroad program and hope we can be successful next year.