Earlier this year, the SBDC National Information Clearinghouse (SBDCNet), which is hosted by the South-West Texas Border Small Business Development Center Network (SWTX Border SBDC Network), welcomed three of ten students from the Universidad de Chile to take part in a three-month SBDC internship. The other seven students were assigned to four additional programs within the SWTX Border SBDC Network. The opportunity for this intern exchange came about from conversations between the SWTX Border SBDC Network, SBDCNet and the Servicio de Cooperación Técnica (Sercotec), as part of their work to assist the development of SBDCs in Chile through the Small Business Network of the Americas (SBNA) program. The international intern exchange pilot was formalized through an agreement between The University of Texas at San Antonio and the Universidad de Chile, respective hosts to the SWTX Border SBDC Network and its Chilean counterpart, the Centros de Desarrollo de Negocios (CDN).

The Interns

The Chilean interns are in their final year of study pursuing their undergraduate degree in Industrial Civil Engineering at the Universidad de Chile. The interns assigned to SBDCNet brought with them a solid business acumen, strong analytical skills and an entrepreneurial spirit, the background essential and complementary to our research team. During their time with us, they were consistently professional, proactive, engaged and inquisitive. The latter a fresh reminder to explore and examine our internal processes and procedures and to ensure that we can always explain not just the “how,” but more importantly the “why.”

The Experience

From the start, it was evident hosting the interns would be a mutual learning experience. During their first week, we had an exchange of understanding in a variety of areas, including the nature of entrepreneurship and business development in both of our countries, terminology discussions and even the differences in geographic boundary definitions and how that relates to the use of geographies in our research. As part of their ongoing training, they learned business research methodologies and the vast array of small business resources and databases available to carry out their research projects. Given the diversity of industries we work with, it was interesting to observe the Chilean interns learning about new business concepts. In addition to working on research projects, interns completed dedicated projects during their three-month assignment. At the SBDC network's closing reception, all ten of the Chilean interns detailed the value-added projects they had executed as part of their respective programs as well as the valuable experience and cultural insights gained during their internship.

Over the course of the SBDC internship, there was a natural cultural exchange as well. During office gatherings, interns would tell us about their weekend adventures and discoveries as well as talk about their Chilean traditions and experiences. For example, the experience of living through the Chilean earthquake of 2010 and the reality of being prepared in the event of this natural disaster. The research team would in turn talk about their American experience and share tips on their favorite local eateries. The exchange went on even through their last week when the SBDCNet staff hosted a farewell breakfast and introduced them to "breakfast tacos" (one of the many local cuisines San Antonio is known for).

The Takeaway

The SBDC internship with Chile would not have been possible without the contributions of many but most of all, to the Chilean students who brought their authentic selves with the highest level of professionalism to this experience.

We hope reading about this innovative SBDC internship inspires you to consider how your SBDC can develop or expand it’s own internship programs. If you’d like to learn more or have an SBDC story you think would make a great feature, please Contact Us.