After mentoring hospitality and tourism students for more than a decade, Dr. Swathi Ravichandran wondered what other support she could offer to the future hotel and restaurant managers. Ravichandran, coordinator of the Hospitality Management Program in the School of Foundations, Leadership and Administration, knew that many students would eventually be working with others from overseas—either here in the United States or abroad. So, she wanted to create an opportunity that would simulate real-life atmospheres in which students would find themselves. Then, something clicked. In 2015, she found a solution that would place students in Italian hotels and restaurants as interns and, at the same time, allow them to receive credit for a required practicum. Working with VACCA advisor Chris Connors, Ravichandran created the first-ever internship in Florence at Kent State’s Florence Center.

"Internships in Italy are different. There’s a lot more observing," she said, comparing internships between the United States and Italy. Despite some differences, however, the Italian Internships prepare students in ways they would not have encountered stateside.

Because some students may not be fluent in Italian, there are other ways they can become involved, she said. For example, they shadow hotel managers and interview them about hiring, sales, marketing, and daily operations. Ravichandran said this rare entrée not only acquaints them with Italian business practices, but also Italian culture. “The students are at work by themselves,” she said. In the Internship’s inaugural year, there were four students, but by the next year, eight students studied in Florence. At first, said Ravichandran, there were two hotel internship sites.

But by 2016, the number also doubled: Gelataria Baroncini, Hotel Tornabuoni Beacci, Reale Firenze and Mercado Centrale. But it’s not all work and no play in Italy, said Ravichandran. In 2015, students had the opportunity to travel to Milan where the World’s Fair was held. Then, in 2016, the future hospitality professionals traveled to Milan and Tuscany where they visited wineries, olive groves and took pizza- and gelato-making classes.

“Each of those is an added cost component, but the students said it would be worth it,” she said.

Ravichandran also added a reflective component to the internship by requiring students to keep blogs documenting their journeys, which also serve as real-time souvenirs.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Ravichandran created such an interactive opportunity for students. In 2014, she was awarded Distinguished Educator of the Year by the Professional Convention Management Association, who celebrated her “going above and beyond to provide students with extraordinary learning experiences.” But besides the worldly alternative exposure for students, two practical paths allow them to round out their skill set, she said. In one instance, students who may remain the United States learn how to work with immigrant workers, which
Andrew Lepp: Combining parks and rec with education in Uganda

Even before he was hired to teach at Kent, Dr. Andrew Lepp had set his sights on an education abroad program in Uganda. In his job interview 13 years ago, he mentioned his proposal to eventually take students to the land-locked East African nation.

True to his word, just a few years after Lepp was hired as an assistant professor to teach recreation and tourism courses, he founded in 2006 the Uganda Study Abroad Program. “I focused on trying to better understand the potential for tourism in rural Uganda to create not just development opportunities, but also to provide funds for environmental education in rural communities for the local population,” he said.

Today, Lepp is an Associate Professor in Recreation, Parks, Tourism and Management (RPTM) in the School of Foundations, Leadership and Administration. Since 2006, he has led teams of eager, young scholars to the capital of Kampala and surrounding cities.

Lepp said his interest in travelling, tourism and recreation began while he, himself, was a student. In the late 1990s, he was Peace Corps volunteer in Uganda. Armed with a degree in National Resource Management, he worked for the U.S. Forest Service too, which eventually led him to complete his doctoral dissertation today, his interests include examining people’s leisure behavior.

NEW! Event Planning Minor Cohort offered in Florence, Italy

In 2017, the first Event Planning Minor cohort will be offered at the 2017 Florence Summer Institute (FSI). Students can enroll in the following two classes, required for the Event Planning Minor:

RPTM 26060 Introduction to Global Tourism (Global Diversity course)  
SPAD 45024 Sport in Global Perspective  
Contact: Chris Connors, mconnor1@kent.edu

Students can also take other courses in Florence. For more course offerings, go to:  
http://www.kent.edu/ehhs/fla/hm/minor-event-planning

To find out more about the 2016 Florence experiences of the Elite 8, go to:  
http://kentstateselite8.wixsite.com/elite8/brian  
To complete your practicum or internship in Florence, contact Dr. Swathi Ravichandran at: sravicha@kent.edu

fosters empathy and exposes the eventual managers to workplace challenges. “To me, the most interesting aspect is that, often times, they are doing work outside the country. They get to learn what it’s like to be a foreign worker,” she said. In another instance, students, who may find themselves managing properties overseas, get exposed to that process in Italy. Hotel chains such as Marriott and Hilton, for example, are often staffed by ex-pats all over the world. These same hotel chains, said Ravichandran, highly value students’ education experiences abroad. Despite great success after launching Kent’s Florence Center’s first internship abroad, there’s no time for Ravichandran to rest on her laurels. Said Ravichandran, “We’re actually in the process of getting feedback for this year, so we can make next year even better.”
“I’m interested in tourism and its many tangents – using tourism as an agent of development in a place like Uganda,” he said. While he was completing his dissertation, he researched in Uganda for a year as a Fulbright Fellow. After that, Lepp focused on how tourism and recreation – and national parks – could be used to help people. “Tourists come with a lot of money. I thought, ‘How can we use money to increase rural people’s interests in parks as agents in development,” he said.

Perhaps a pinnacle of Lepp’s career happened in 2013 after he arranged an international conference for both students and scholars at Uganda’s leading research institution, Makerere University. At the university, said Lepp, he wanted to involve students and faculty from across EHHS and the world to partake in the Ugandan experience. Kent professors including RPTM’s Phillip Wang, Joanne Dowdy in the School of Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum Studies, Salem Campus’ Sarah Smiley and retired RPTM professor Wayne Munson all participated in the conference that combined education with environmental concerns. “I was trying to get EHHS faculty involved by linking education and the parks and park management,” he said. The Kent professors also assisted Lepp manage 23 students – a far cry from just seven students who went on the inaugural trip years before. Beyond Kent representatives, however, throngs of faculty and students from all over North America, Europe and Africa gathered to discuss sustainable environmental education in Uganda.

These days, Lepp is taking a hiatus from leading the education abroad program in Uganda; however, he pointed out that his colleague, Dr. David Sharp, in the School of Health Sciences, would be escorting a group this year. Lepp said in 2018 he hopes to revive his education abroad program in Uganda. But, regarding the many experiences he has had with his students, he said, “I have been able to revisit the wonder again through my students every time I went, which kept it interesting and special to me. I could still see how these places were the awe and wonder for the students. I could feel that again.”

Lepp’s advice for students:
If you’re thinking of education abroad, Lepp suggests you plan at least a year or two in advance to save money.

In general, students can expect to pay $4,000 for the Uganda trip.
The biggest cost? Airfare, Lepp says.
Scholarship opportunities are also available, so don’t let cost dissuade you.

Where is Uganda?

For more information about Education Abroad Uganda, contact: Dr. Andrew Lepp at: alepp1@kent.edu
For students interested in Education Abroad Uganda in 2017, contact: Dr. David Sharp at: dsharp7@kent.edu