



Leipzig collaboration yields valuable relationships

By David Salisbury

In 2007, while Jens Meiler was visiting his parents in Germany, the associate professor of chemistry was invited to give a lecture at his alma mater, the University of Leipzig.

“When I gave that talk on my research in structural and chemical biology, I found a tremendous amount of interest in what we are doing at Vanderbilt and learned that there is a great deal of complementary research going on in Leipzig,” Meiler said. In fact, Meiler stirred up so much interest that two years later Annette Beck-Sickinger, professor of biochemistry and bioorganic chemistry at Leipzig, spent her sabbatical at Vanderbilt. During her visit she helped establish a number of collaborations, leading the administrations of the two universities to sign a five-year memorandum of understanding that allows and encourages academic exchanges, facilitates joint research programs, student programs and a cultural exchange program. Over the last few years, the size of the collaboration has grown to embrace 20 faculty members at the two universities. More than 20 graduate students have spent time studying at the other campus, and groups of five undergraduates have been exchanged for the last few summers. Last October, Leipzig Professor Daniel Huster spent 10 days on campus to teach a mini-course on the use of NMR spectroscopy in biology.

“Leipzig has become one of our half-dozen strategic international partners,” said Tim McNamara, vice provost for faculty and international affairs. “It is a very productive relationship and we certainly want it to prosper.”

Leipzig University was founded in 1409 and has enjoyed 600 years of uninterrupted teaching and research, making it the second oldest university in Germany. It is also one of Germany’s top 20 research organizations. The university has made it a tradition to cross academic boundaries and promote interdisciplinary research.

Meiler and his colleagues have received a grant from the National Science Foundation that has enabled the group to hold research symposia at both Leipzig and Vanderbilt involving faculty from both schools, pay for research trips for graduate students, allow faculty to teach short courses at each other’s campuses and provide postdoctoral and undergraduate students with summer internships. In addition, several Vanderbilt undergraduates have been awarded scholarships from a German Research Internships in Science and Engineering program that has allowed them to carry out research in chemical biology in Leipzig.

The Leipzig connection is one of many cases where grassroots from Vanderbilt researchers have led to formal relationships. Other such international partnerships include Queen’s University Belfast, which was established by faculty members in the Robert Penn Warren Center; the University of Sao Paulo, which has productive collaborations in art, education policy and history; and the University of Melbourne, one of Vanderbilt’s strongest relationships, which extends across many academic fields.

