

Student Group Travels Abroad, Carrying Banner of Free Enterprise

Young Americans work in countries yearning for market know-how

By Jerry Heaster
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When Students in Free Enterprise was founded a quarter of a century ago, its creators were seeking a way to rekindle the interest of young Americans in the magic of the marketplace.

Now the group's looming challenge is how best to take its mission global.

The promise of capitalism that had looked so bright in the 1960s had by the mid-1970s turned to the dross of stagflation and bear markets. As the economy foundered and America's fortunes waned, government action was increasingly misperceived as the answer to society's economic problems.

The rise of SIFE, as that fledgling group came to be known, has progressed in tandem with the resurgence of free enterprise's popularity. Not only has the past decade brought unprecedented prosperity to U.S. society, but also it has been accompanied by the emergence of worker capitalism. Whereas a generation or two ago stock ownership was almost entirely the province of ruling-class plutocrats, stock investing has since also become the realm of opportunity for those who provide the labor.

It's stretching things to say SIFE was the most influential factor in the rebirth of appreciation for what free markets can achieve. The creation of Students in Free Enterprise, however, was a symbolically critical part of the overall process.

Three years after SIFE's founding, eight regional teams competed in its first national competition in Dallas. By 1982, just as the national

economy was hitting rock bottom, the future of a shrinking SIFE was problematic.

Then a couple of things happened. The policies of a presidential administration committed to the "magic of the marketplace" began to revive a long-moribund economy just about the time a dynamic young guy by the name of Alvin Rohrs became SIFE's president.

At Kansas City, Mo.'s Bartle Hall,

pays, free markets work, democracy leads to prosperity and freedom brings social responsibility."

One of the most interesting recent developments is SIFE's expanding presence in Russia, which is struggling to make the transition from command economy to market economy. There is no societal memory of how free enterprise works in Russia, which puts SIFE members there in the role of helping create from scratch the emerging free enterprise culture.

A Russian SIFE member related how the student members there often become their parents' teachers when it comes to acquainting Russia's oldsters with the ins and outs of free enterprise.

Another innovative outreach effort was made by a SIFE chapter in California, which set up a "cow bank" in a village in India. The project involved buying cows and lending them to villagers, who consumed some of the milk and sold what they didn't consume to increase family income.

It seemed a quintessential example not only of SIFE's bent for entrepreneurial ingenuity, but also its emerging global orientation.

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Rohrs recently presided over an international exposition and career fair involving about 1,200 students from 158 colleges around the world. The list of the competition's hundreds of judges reads like a who's who of U.S. corporate leadership.

SIFE's reach now extends to 700 campuses in America and a dozen foreign countries, where teams promote the credo that "hard work