NARRATOR: RIT is a global university. And this includes in the heart of Europe – home to RIT Croatia. RIT Croatia has locations in the capital city of Zagreb and the historic coastal city of Dubrovnik. In this episode of Intersections: The RIT Podcast, RIT Croatia president and dean Don Hudspeth talks with Bob Finnerty, RIT’s associate vice president of communications, to discuss the 25th anniversary of RIT’s presence in Croatia and the opportunities that exist with its strategic location in central Europe.

BOB: Please set the scene of Croatia, a nation at the crossroads of Central and Southeast Europe. From the capital city of Zagreb to the coastal city of Dubrovnik, what makes this area of the world so special in a global context?

DON: Looking at Croatia, when you look at a map of Europe, we’re very much located in Central Europe and really sort of geographically as well as historically really where East meets West. And I think that is not only from a geography point of view, but also has been reflected in the history of the country. For a small country it’s very diverse. And I say diversity both from a physical terrain point of view to also culturally. Like in many countries, a lot of differences. Like even in the United States, the differences between the North and the South, we have similar differences here between Zagreb in the north region relative to Dalmatia and to Dubrovnik where our other campus is located.

BOB: RIT Croatia is celebrating its 25th anniversary. You were formerly known as the American College of Management and Technology when you were established in 1997. At the start, you were based in Dubrovnik, the historic city along the sea. Tell us more about what has changed since those early years, including adding this second location in Zagreb.

DON: We were the first private educational institution to be established in Croatia because prior to that time all of the higher ed in the country was in the public domain. So, it was to see, was there a market for private education? And then, second of all, with us having our first program in tourism and hospitality management being established was really to help Croatia develop in the postwar period because the war for independence ended in 1995. So, when you think about it, we started just a little over two years after that.

BOB: That’s amazing when you think about it.

DON: It is. It really is. And it was realized that things had evolved and needed managers and leaders, ultimately, going into the tourism industry who were going to help with this transition with what was occurring on a global basis. So, that was the key thing actually for the start of the program. When we first started, we had based all the initial budgets on an enrollment of 75 students. We ended up enrolling 175 because the demand was really high. And the key part of that was the recognition of the high quality and high value of American education. So, after that program, shortly thereafter, which I think was about eight or nine years, we started offering the information technology undergraduate degree program from Golisano College. And then our big move was the expansion into our second campus and opening up the campus in Zagreb in the capital city. When you look at Zagreb as a city itself, the population is about a million
people. And when you look at the drawing area of it within about an hour out is coming pretty close to about two million people. So, when you think about the 3.8 million, the focus is really here. So, we really saw that if we wanted to further grow and particularly in other degree areas, we needed to have a presence within the capital city. We started in 2011, is when we opened up here. And we started with the international business degree program, also the IT program, which is now the web and mobile computing program. And then also adding our master’s degree programs, the organizational leadership and innovation, which currently is service leadership and innovation, and as well as the information technology and analytics MS program.

BOB: If you can describe the higher education landscape in Croatia, we know that they public system is dominant here. How do you differentiate? What is the significance of what you bring here to RIT Croatia?

DON: Yeah. I think there certainly is – as I mentioned before, we were the first private educational institution. And since that time there has been a growth in the sector, but it’s still pretty small. The private education market has mainly been focused so far within business fields as well as the IT field. Where we have really been establishing our value is by showing it with outputs, and that has to do with the type of jobs they get. And also, the other part about having a much more individual approach with the students and very student-centered learning. And a lot of attention given to really recognizing their potential, things that are all standard with what happens on the Rochester campus and which also we do the same here in Croatia.

BOB: What do you see on the horizon? What can you say of the programs you’d like to bring down the line? And how does that work when you’re chatting with your colleagues back home in Rochester?

DON: We have very much a goal to be expanding our degree offerings. And the next one that’s going to be coming on is the new media design program from the College of Art and Design. And we think it’s going to be a great fit. Definitely there’s a market need, but really a nice complement to the international business program as well as the web and mobile computing from it.

BOB: RIT Croatia now has more than 2,600 alumni living in more than 40 countries across the globe. How do you measure their success? And what are you most proud of when you think back to your alumni in the last 25 years?

DON: I think the general comment about what we’re proud of – and it’s also a validation of what we’re doing – is the high rate of employment. We’ve been averaging about 90 percent employed six months following graduation. And that’s been pretty consistent. Having had alums for 25 years, people are really moving up in their positions. The other part that we’re very excited about – 25 percent of our alums have their own businesses either on a full-time basis that they’ve developed them, and some of them are growing quite significantly, or even a lot of them have on a part-time basis.
BOB: So, they have some entrepreneurial skills and allows them to pivot wherever things go.

DON: Correct. But we’ve also had ones going and pursuing within public service. The current mayor of Dubrovnik is an alum. We also have alums working in Brussels in the European Commission. Some really great outcomes but there are literally thousands of those. The other thing you’ll be pleased to see if that a lot of them have gone abroad and are working in international settings, but a lot have stayed in the country and within the region from Bosnia-Herzegovina as well as Montenegro, which to me is an important thing because making sure that their skillsets and the things that they’ve learned and their mindset is also having domestic and regional benefit besides the international. But we’ve got a super group of alums.

BOB: The opportunities that you see for RIT students and faculty members back in the United States with you. What would you like to say to the folks back in Rochester?

DON: The first one, I think, from a student end is the study abroad opportunity. It’s rare that when an American university actually has campuses – this is actually part of RIT, so it’s a seamless transfer, and the full comfort zone and everything. So from a student end, I think it’s just a natural and wonderful way to be able to spend whether it be a short program or a full semester, to come to Croatia and be part of RIT but in Europe. And then be able to leverage that and piggyback off the accessibility to other European countries. So, from a student end, I think that’s a key thing. I think from a faculty end, the research opportunities and to be able to stimulate more of this collaboration. Because we can really, through the combination of it, really create some unique research opportunities where us being in Europe, plus also our European accreditation or Croatian accreditation, being able to access research grants and opportunities that maybe a faculty member in Rochester wouldn’t be able to. And then the other part that ties in to alums. A lot of alums, and wherever they’ve ended up in the world, and I’m talking RIT alums regardless of where they graduated, they have a base in Croatia. And it’s always an open invitation, dropping by for a cup of coffee where it’s in Zagreb or Dubrovnik. A lot of people who were taking – pre-pandemic, and I’m sure it’s going to be coming back – taking cruises of the Adriatic, a lot of them stop in Dubrovnik. And it’s a quick walk from the old town – stop by the campus. And many folks have done that. We’ve had even some retired faculty members from Rochester who just happen to be on a cruise ship, walk up, and have a walk around the campus.

BOB: That’s great.

DON: And I think it provides – it’s kind of a nice feel, when you’re traveling somewhere. You could say the same in terms of Dubai and Kosovo, “Oh, I’ve got this sort of extra little home here.”

BOB: I feel, too, that you have a lot of communication with the other campuses, with Kosovo and Dubai and China.
DON: We do.

BOB: So, you’re collaborating with them, not just Rochester.

DON: And I think that’s the beauty and the richness of it. And we do have – in the study abroad we currently have students from RIT Croatia in Dubai, in addition to students in Rochester, we’ve had students coming from Kosovo. So, it’s really, it’s a nice synergy.

BOB: It’s this ecosystem that RIT has created. And to think that really it started here 25 years ago, this ecosystem of what we’ve created for RIT Global, as we call it. So, congratulations.

NARRATOR: Thank you for listening to Intersections: The RIT Podcast, a production of RIT Marketing and Communications. To learn more about our university, go to www.rit.edu and to hear more podcasts, subscribe to Intersections on iTunes, Spotify, TuneIn, or Soundcloud or by visiting www.rit.edu/news/podcasts.