In the last year, Dr. Frank Franzak’s research and teaching have taken him to the Middle East, specifically the United Arab Emirates, and Cairo, Egypt. This summer, he will present papers in Thailand and Boston. (He recognizes the latter is considered domestic, even if the local Bay Staters’ don’t always drive like it.) Dr. Franzak is associate professor of marketing, faculty advisor to the Master of Science in Global Marketing Management program, and faculty mentor to VCU’s da Vinci Center for Innovation. He has been with the VCU School of Business since 1986 and served as department chair from 2002 – 2008.

One of Dr. Franzak’s primary research interests is new product development. Lately, he is exploring this topic within the context of commercializing emerging technologies, particularly when small-to-medium sized enterprises (SMEs) “go global” early in their life. In June 2009, he and Dr. Van Wood presented a paper on this topic at the Second Global Studies Conference, held at Zayed University in Dubai, UAE. In “Successful Strategic Alliances with International Partners: Key Issues for Small- to Medium-Sized Enterprises,” authors Franzak, Wood, and Dennis A. Pitta of University of Baltimore, focused on success drivers in new international markets. A model guiding SMEs in managing overseas partners or allies was developed.

“The United Arab Emirates and the Global Studies Conference was a good match because of the UAE’s strong presence in the global economy,” says Dr. Franzak of the federation of seven emirates whose per capita GDP is ranked 17th in the world by the International Monetary Fund. As the world’s economy slows down, they are interested in diversifying beyond their traditional oil and finance-based companies. Outside assistance is often necessary.

From Dubai, Dr. Franzak traveled to Egypt to visit with VCU students who were finishing up a 3-week study experience in Cairo on a U.S. Department of Education Business and International Education grant. Expanding on that taste of the Nile, this past summer, Dr. Franzak traveled to Cairo with the VCU students selected for the second phase of the grant, staying through the first week of their program. He observed first hand the intensity with which our students immersed themselves in Egyptian culture, grasping the Arabic language, eating falafel and koshari, and dodging traffic (also known as “walking like an Egyptian,” says Dr. Franzak).

A highlight of the recent Cairo trip was visiting the plant of Oriental Weavers, a very modern global carpet and rug manufacturer headquartered in Egypt. New product development at this company ranges from design and style updates to improving the manufacturing process. New looms produce a rug with 4 million points per square meter, a firmness that prevents spill milk from soaking in, leaving Dr. Franzak wondering, “Where that technology was when I was growing up.”

This visit to Cairo followed Dr. Franzak’s 10-day product development course at Mizr International University (MIU) during Spring Break in March, 2010. That was a working trip, starting every day at 8:30 AM and often ending in the late afternoon. The hosts did provide a weekend get-away to Alexandria, whose Library and Mediterranean Sea beaches should be on any world traveler’s list of to-dos. Egyptian students? “Not unlike our own,” says Dr. Franzak. Some arrived late for the early class. Cell phone usage was ubiquitous. They were interested in the strategic role of innovation. And, of course, they wanted to know what was going to be on the test.” The importance of product development is not pervasive among companies in the Middle East, but recognition is growing. The VCU School of the Arts initiative in Qatar is instrumental in spreading the word.

What's next? Dr. Franzak is off to a conference in Phuket, Thailand, in July. He will team up with Dr. Ricardo Arechavala, a colleague from Universidad de Guadalajara (UdeG), Mexico, and present a paper on commercializing technology developed through university Technology Transfer Offices. UdeG has been an important partner for the VCU School of Business, particularly in areas of biosciences and sources of funding. What better place to advance the relationship than on the beach at Phuket?