This could be a story about missed opportunities, but it’s not. Rather, it’s an unusual tale about two professors and their business schools coming together to collaborate in creative ways that benefit students and research.

Cal Poly business law Professor Chris Carr has been a longstanding Fulbright Senior Specialist. That program funds and sends select U.S. scholars to elite foreign institutions to consult on issues such as capacity building, rule of law, entrepreneurship, and academic program development. After serving in Tunisia and Mongolia, Carr was invited to visit Pakistan’s top engineering school, the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) in Islamabad, in 2015.

“When I told people of the invitation, let’s just say more than a few people didn’t get it and politely questioned the value of a visit to Pakistan,” said Carr. “But that in-the-box thinking and feedback confirmed to me that I should go.”

While at NUST, Carr met Professor Majid Raja, a faculty member in the NUST Business School specializing in entrepreneurship. The two worked with students pursuing concepts for new ventures and noticed the same kinds of students taking advantage of entrepreneurial resources: men from wealthy families and urban areas.

The duo discussed the overwhelming need for increasing Pakistani women’s economic participation rate, which currently hovers at 24 percent. Raja and Carr saw the 65 million Pakistani women between the ages of 18 and 35 as the nation’s greatest untapped resource.

Thanks to the Orfalea College of Business’ visiting professor program, which is designed to attract leading business educators from around the world, their collaboration didn’t end. Upon his return to California, Carr invited Raja to Cal Poly to collaborate on research that maps out the possible economic ecosystem needed to support more female entrepreneurship in Pakistan. The two hope Pakistan’s policymakers can embrace their findings to enhance opportunities for rural and urban women and significantly increase Pakistan’s gross domestic product.

Orfalea also welcomed Raja to teach and share his perspective with students. Raja dove right in, teaching IT 371: Supply
Chain Management in Manufacturing and Services, where students learn how to work with a variety of value chains, including those that connect with emerging markets such as Pakistan. Raja confirms that his nation is experiencing a flood of entrepreneurial activity, in part to offer services desired by citizens when major U.S. brands such as Paypal and Amazon hesitate to engage in the region. Raja’s main message for students: how much hubs like Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi have in common with American business culture. They also offer a wealth of talent, resources and potential customers for Western companies.

“Pakistan houses one of the biggest populations of millennials in the world. Most of them have easy access to all modern connectivity tools and fairly understand the American culture and business environment,” said Raja. He reiterates that most business and STEM education in Pakistan is taught in the English language, with most of the curriculum coming from American or British models. He says many students are unaware that English is also Pakistan’s official and business language.

“Having worked with business and young people in multiple countries, I can confirm that many of Pakistan’s entrepreneurs, engineers, scientists and product developers are at par with their American counterparts in terms of their skill level, creativity, work ethic, understanding of law and other elements that you’d look for in a business partner overseas,” Raja said. “People would be surprised how often Pakistani kids come up with winning products for the U.S. market. They can also make a market of 200 million people accessible to U.S. sellers.”

Orfalea students are readily embracing the perspective Raja brings. “I gained more from this class than I had expected to,” said marketing student Emily Rakhmilevich. “This course was a great opportunity to make me a more well-rounded individual who can also be a well-rounded team member.”

Raja and Carr are optimistic that their collaboration is already yielding positive impacts in the U.S. and Pakistan.

“Just reflect for a moment. What would have been lost if I had listened to the naysayers about Pakistan and not gotten on that plane? You would not believe some of the tech startups and entrepreneurs I met there. Changing these perceptions is what the Fulbright program and others such as the United States Educational Foundation in Pakistan are all about. It’s a great bang for the American taxpayer buck,” said Carr.

“Exactly,” Raja echos. “It’s best that we step away from the fear of this region and begin to embrace our commonalities, potential, and the many opportunities that lie ahead.”