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A Global Worldview Among Extension Professionals: A Case Study of Best Practices for Study Abroad Programs

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A Global Worldview Among Extension Professionals: A Case Study of Best Practices for Study Abroad Programs

Abstract

Globalization and diversifying communities in the United States mandate internationally minded Extension professionals and programming. The knowledge necessary for successfully working in international agricultural and Extension education is vast and takes time to acquire. A catalyst for this learning process is participation in university- or Extension-led study abroad programs. The study reported here affirms the value of best practices for study abroad programs. A Texas A&M University study abroad program to Guatemala provided additional activities before, during, and after the experience to enhance best practices in study abroad programs and to promote the preparation of future and current Extension professionals.

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Introduction

Ludwig (2002) noted that the United States of America has ever-diversifying populations and Extension efforts need to be delivered in a culturally sensitive framework. There is a need for Extension educators to help clientele understand "issues related to the environment, the global marketplace, health and wellness, and how we use technology from a global perspective" (Ludwig, 2002). A sign of a functioning global perspective is that an international outlook in Extension programming is not considered an independent focus; rather, it is integrated by Extension educators into all program areas and all programming efforts (Selby, Peters, Sammons, Branson, & Balschweid, 2005). Patton (1984) noted that for this type of international emphasis to become a reality, Extension specialists and county agents need to educate themselves on the following issues: the importance of international markets to the prosperity of American agriculture, the complexity and severity of world hunger, our global interdependence, world resource distribution and consumption, and an appreciation for world diversity.

Extension professionals identified barriers inhibiting the incorporation of international perspectives into Extension efforts; the top three barriers were lack of time, experience, and that it was not a

programming priority (Selby et al., 2005). Multiple strategies should be employed to effectively develop global awareness and leadership skills in Extension professionals to accomplish a global perspective and the incorporation of that perspective into their efforts (Ludwig, 1999).

One strategy is for Extension to place an emphasis on the importance of international experiences prior to a candidate's being hired. One way Extension successfully accomplishes this is through the International 4-H Youth Exchange (IFYE) program. Ludwig (2002) stated that another powerful option for purposefully promoting the internationalization of Extension and creating a globally minded Extension workforce occurs when future Extension personnel have participated in formal university study abroad programs.

A second strategy is for Extension to encourage and prioritize international experiences for current personnel and agriculture producers. Educational tours and service learning projects in other countries can be implemented for experiential learning.

Research has shown that numerous benefits are derived from study abroad programs (Carlson & Widman, 1988; McCabe, 1994; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2002). Effective study abroad programs include more than simply exposure to a wide variety of experiences; they help students use those experiences to change their perspectives and understanding of other cultures and global issues (Barton, Bruck, & Nelson, 2009). Participants of such programs experience positive growth in the areas of adaptation, culture, collaboration, communication, and their value of knowledge (Black, Moore, Wingenbach, & Rutherford, 2013). Boyd (2001) noted that participants who completed Extension's IFYE program were more sensitive to other cultures, more interested in global events, and more involved in community activities. Programs that include purposefully led activities before, during, and after the experience lend credibility to program success and impact their long-term effects (Roberts & Jones, 2009; Rodriguez & Roberts, 2011).

Many students in university agriculture colleges will have future careers in agricultural and Extension education, yet their international experience is little to none. Furthermore, many current agricultural and Extension education employees lack experience and a depth of knowledge regarding international agricultural systems. Shinn, Wingenbach, Lindner, Briers, and Baker (2009) noted that there are certain bits of knowledge that are essential for professionals working in international agricultural and Extension education. They defined knowledge objects as "fundamental and powerful concepts, knowledge, paradigms, skills, and/or theories" (page 57), and found consensus on 126 unique knowledge objects for agricultural and Extension education. College students' and Extension professionals' participation in international agricultural experiences facilitates the processes of gaining these knowledge objects that will yield highly competent agricultural and Extension personnel.

The potential benefits of study abroad programs on participants' educational development present a challenge to faculty leaders and Extension personnel to make study abroad programs as purposeful and effective as possible. Rodriguez and Roberts (2011) identified best practices for study abroad programs, which include activities before, during, and after study abroad experiences.

Purpose

The purpose of the study reported here was to implement and examine the best practices in study

abroad programs identified by Rodriguez and Roberts (2011). More specifically, the study sought to:

1. Affirm the value of the best practices for study abroad programs posited by Rodriguez and Roberts (2011).
2. Ensure a successful study abroad program implemented by Texas A&M University.
3. Implement and describe additional practices before, during, and after Texas A&M University's study abroad program to enhance best practices in study abroad programs.

Methodology

An instrumental case study approach was used to examine students' experiences in a study abroad program. Case study methodology provides a systematic process for examining actual events, collecting and analyzing data, and reporting the results (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008). Instrumental case study methodology utilizes the study of a specific case in order to gain increased understanding of a broader group or phenomenon (Stake, 1997). Furthermore, an instrumental case study allows researchers to draw conclusions that apply beyond a particular case.

Suggested case study methodological techniques from Stake (1997) and Yin (1984) were implemented for the study. Research steps included: 1. Determining research questions, 2. Purposefully planning data gathering and analysis techniques, 3. Collecting data in the field, 4. Evaluating and analyzing the data, and 5. Preparing this report. Field notes, participant interviews, and observations were techniques used as multiple sources of evidence for analysis. The multiple data collection methods and use of multiple investigators created opportunities to triangulate data in order to strengthen the research findings and conclusions. Comparative analyses of faculty members' field notes and conversations, using the best practices approach proposed by Rodriguez and Roberts (2011), provided the framework for presentation of the results.

The goals of the study abroad program reported here were to learn and implement agricultural leadership theories and practices, using service-learning concepts, as applied in a developing country's context. Texas A&M University partnered with an in-country, nonprofit organization to conduct the program. Ten students and three faculty members stayed 25 days in Guatemala. They engaged in community-based, service-learning activities to apply leadership theories, adult education concepts, cross-cultural communication, and agricultural development principles.

Findings

"Before Experience" best practices proposed by Rodriguez and Roberts (2011) included "addressing concerns about safety, cultural considerations, travel preparation, identifying preexisting knowledge, and reflection" (p. 29). Reflection is "the process of being consciously aware of the expectations associated with the learning experience" (Jones & Bjelland, 2004, p. 963). Prior to Texas A&M University's Guatemala program, students and faculty members met six times for "pre-sessions" to prepare for the study abroad experience. These sessions included guest speakers from Texas A&M University's study abroad office and a representative from the non-profit organization (via Skype), course lectures, and country-specific cultural and logistical information. The pre-sessions were

intended to foster cultural awareness, create foundational course subject-matter knowledge, and ease students' fears about travel to Guatemala. Student-initiated presentations on Guatemala's culture and history promoted intellectual relationships, fostered student ownership of information, and increased excitement for program travel. Stories from prior international experiences along with simulations provided by program faculty afforded additional learning opportunities and opportunities to adjust student expectations.

Rodriguez and Roberts (2011) identified "During Experience" best practices as "course structure, community involvement, extracurricular activities, and reflection" (p. 29). They noted there should be greater emphasis on experiential, rather than classroom learning. The Guatemala experience validated the importance of experiential learning. A majority of students' time was spent in schools and villages working collaboratively with local residents on service-learning projects related to school gardens. Prior to implementing these service-learning projects, students spent time with subject matter specialists to gain area-specific gardening knowledge and skills, as well as to learn teaching methods to transfer this information to local school kids, teachers, and adult volunteers.

Students worked in small groups to conduct and document needs assessments for various school gardening projects. These small groups would then lead the entire study abroad group in implementing planned service projects. Completing these activities created more opportunity for student/native Guatemalan interactions and gave a "real world" context for financial, cultural, and environmental issues. These experiences helped students practice theoretical concepts, such as youth and adult learning theory and multiple leadership models and theories. Furthermore, the needs assessment assignment also served as useful departmental documentation of students' high-impact experiences.

Extracurricular tours and cultural activities were program highlights. Participants interacted with Guatemalans while learning about weaving, tortilla making, preparing family meals, and salsa dancing through pre-established relationships through the in-country nonprofit organization. Students were required to conduct a structured interview with someone in Guatemala who demonstrated leadership skills and report their findings. A mixture of young and elderly, professional, laborer, volunteer, native-Guatemalan, and non-profit workers served as resources for this assignment. The students noted in their course journals and through debriefing sessions that these interviews and findings added another layer of cultural understanding, broadening of horizons, and life-application to leadership theories.

Student reflection during study abroad enhances opportunities to synthesize information (Rodriguez & Roberts, 2011). Reflection is normally achieved through journaling or group discussions. Students kept reflective journals, and each wrote at least one contribution for the study abroad blog. Seven group reflection sessions, led by student teams, were conducted during the time in Guatemala to help students connect subject matter with practical experience in Guatemala.

"After Experience" best practices identified by Rodriguez and Roberts (2011) included "reflection and motivating students for further learning" (p. 30). Program participants were required to attend post-travel classroom sessions. Course and service-learning project debriefing sessions evolved when students presented their experiences in departmental seminars. Students were encouraged to

continue learning through involvement with the non-profit organization and by incorporating Guatemala contacts and situations into current course projects and assignments. Social media outlets facilitated continued communication between program participants, faculty, non-profit organization leaders, and friends in Guatemala.

Conclusion

The outcome of Texas A&M University's study abroad program in Guatemala supported the best practices for study abroad programs (Rodriguez & Roberts, 2011). Undergraduate students participating in international courses or faculty-led study abroad programs consistently overestimate their intercultural sensitivity (Fabregas-Janeiro, Kelsey, & Robinson, 2011). It is incumbent upon faculty leaders of study abroad programs to incorporate a wide variety of experiences that will challenge students' international worldview and facilitate true growth in their intercultural sensitivity.

We highly recommend expanding study abroad program "best practices" by including supplemental activities, such as using social media interaction (helpful for maintaining communication when abroad); increasing contact time with host country families and community activities (helpful for breaking cultural stereotypes); and partnering with a local university or non-profit organization (reduces time needed to establish community relationships). We recommend formalizing international simulations, stories, and case studies by documenting them to create opportunities for student discussion and interaction. These activities combined with meaningful interpretation and discussion, make the experiences more relevant and help students understand how these experiences are "part" of the course content (Barton et al., 2009).

These methods and suggestions should be utilized by Extension to promote a global worldview among Extension personnel. Extension administration should emphasize the value of international experiences for employees as well as clientele and create corresponding expectations for the implementation of international educational activities. Programs such as Extension's IFYE program could be modified for adult audiences. Extension professionals in the field can organize and implement tours to other countries for younger Extension agents and agriculture producers. These types of trips do not need to be formal and should not require an exorbitant amount of planning. Rodriguez and Roberts' (2011) three-stage model should be applied to these international activities to maximize learning and enjoyment. The helpfulness of the in-country non-profit organization partnership within the study encourages the seeking-out of such partnerships with any such international venture.

Purposeful planning for student engagement facilitates opportunities for students, Extension personnel, and Extension clientele to develop intercultural competence, which Briers, Shinn, & Nguyen (2010) noted as a critical function of faculty charged with facilitating courses involving intercultural experiences. These international experiences, when conducted correctly, encourage the exchange of ideas, build lasting friendships, and give graduates advantages when applying for jobs (Ludwig, 2002).

Many of today's university students hold positive perceptions regarding the value of international educational experiences (Briers et al., 2010). The stage is set for faculty leaders of international programs to create dynamic, positive international learning experiences. The focus of the Guatemala study abroad program was service-learning in an international setting. Guatemalan family and

community contacts, coupled with course content and service-learning projects, helped participants gain an unprecedented level of cultural immersion that produced life-changing experiences.

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