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Experiences of 4-H Japanese Exchange Program on Participants: An Evaluative Study

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Abstract

The study described here assessed the 4-H Japanese Exchange Program in terms of arrival and departure orientation programs, 4-H program expectations, host family expectations, program coordination, and school and community experience. Overall, findings indicated that participants rated their exchange experience as "excellent." The service received from 4-H, friendliness, and professionalism were also rated highly by participants. Seventy-one percent indicated that they would recommend the 4-H exchange program to others in their home country. As a result of participating in the 4-H Japanese Exchange Program, participants agreed that they better understand intercultural sensitivity and global perspectives.

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Introduction

The National 4-H Japanese Exchange Program has existed since 1972 and currently involves 35 states. Since 1972, more than 30,000 families in the United States have hosted Japanese teenagers, and more than 6,000 4-hers have made visits to Japan through this unique program. The program has grown and expanded over the years to include a variety of opportunities. The 4-H Japanese Exchange program is operated by the Cooperative Extension Service nationally, and through the 4-H Youth Development Departments of Cooperative Extension of the land-grant university in each state. The overall mission of the 4-H International Exchange Programs is to provide age-appropriate experiential, educational, cultural, and development opportunities for youth.

The National 4-H International Programs Committee (IPC) formulates overall guidelines to promote uniformity and continuity in the management of the exchanges in the United States. The IPC works with three Japanese organizations on the high school program--Labo, Lex, and Uterk. These Japanese organizations promote the program in Japan and select and prepare delegates according to guidelines mutually agreed upon by 4-H and the Japanese Organizations. This program is in compliance with the rules and regulations of the Council for Standards on International Education (CSJET).

A number of studies have documented the impact of international exchange programs on participants, host families, and the host institutions (Boyd, et al., 2001; Tritz & Martin, 1997; Opper, Teichler, & Carlson, 1990; Hansel & Grove, 1986). Tritz and Martin (1997) suggested that exposure to a country, its people and culture, will have an impact on anyone who has studied abroad. As a result of the exposure, perceptions are changed, thoughts challenged, and, most important, a worldly perspective is garnered. Similarly, Opper, Teichler and Carlson (1990) indicated that participation or involvement in international activities provides cultural awareness,

improves communication abilities, and increases foreign language skills, and ultimately will have an amazing effect on students' overall development. Boyd et al. (2001) found that the International 4-H Youth Exchange (IYFE) program made positive impacts on participants. For example, IYFE participants indicated that they were more sensitive to other cultures, more aware of global events, and more involved in community activities than prior to their participation.

Other researchers have examined the influence of Study Abroad Programs (SAPs) on college students (Ayers, 1996; Hutchins, 1996; Zhai & Scheer, 2002). Findings from these studies suggest that SAPs have provided a variety of opportunities for students to increase their awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity, personal growth, and develop skills and attitudes that will allow them to function successfully in an interdependent world. In addition, exchange programs have helped participants to acquire foreign language skills, and an understanding of different people and cultures.

Hansel and Grove (1986) found that adolescents traveling abroad showed greater improvement than those who did not have the opportunity to travel abroad in 10 of the 17 personal characteristics (adaptability, appreciation of own family, awareness and appreciation of host country and culture, awareness of opportunities, communication with others, critical thinking, exchange of ideas, foreign language appreciation and ability, high standards for personal relationships, independence-responsibility for self, international awareness, non-materialism, open mindedness, personal growth and maturity, self-confidence, and understanding other cultures). Students who traveled abroad seem to have learned more about other cultures and have a greater appreciation of their own culture. In addition, they found that travel abroad students gained skills that enabled them to deal more effectively with demands of later life experiences and have increase concern for spiritual values rather than material things. Hansel and Grove also found that students who went abroad only for a summer tended to show greater adaptability than those who went abroad for a whole year (p. 86). Overall, they concluded that intercultural homestay has a positive effect on adolescents.

Arnold (2003) reported that host youth had a number of experiences that contributed to their personal growth. Prominent among these were making new friends, learning to communicate with others from a different culture, being a good representative of the United States, site seeing with their international student, and having someone from a different culture live with them. Host youth also reported worries and difficulties in hosting exchange students which included the exchange student getting homesick, making mistakes, communication, language, not getting along with the student, and not making a good impression.

The study described here attempted to assess the impact of the 4-H Japanese High School Exchange Program on its participants.

Purpose and Objectives

The overall purpose of this study was to assess the impact of the 4-H Japanese High School Exchange Program on Japanese participants. Specific objectives were to:

1. Describe the demographic profile of exchange program participants;
2. Assess the Japanese exchange program in terms of:
 - Arrival and departure orientation programs,
 - 4-H program expectations
 - Host family expectations,
 - Program coordination, and
 - School and community experience.

Methodology

The Japanese students were all high school students (N=52) who ranged in age from 16 to 19 years. Students spent a full school year (2002-2003) attending high school and living with host families in 22 different states. Each student was selected for participation in this program by one of the three Japanese youth-serving organizations: Labo, Lex, and Utrek.

Based on a review of literature and experiences of authors, a 50-item questionnaire was developed and validated by the International Program Committee (IPC), consisting of faculty; specialists from youth development, diversity, and international programs; and two Japanese youth exchange professionals. Forced-choice and Likert-type scale items asked youth to rate their experiences related to and expectations of the host family, program coordination, school and community experience, and the value of the arrival and departure orientation programs and demographic characteristics. A post-hoc reliability analysis on the Likert-scale items revealed an acceptable

reliability (Cronbach's alpha=0.83). The questionnaire was administered by one of the IPC members during a departure orientation meeting. A Japanese interpreter was present to clarify any items that were unclear to students. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Results

Demographic Profile

Most exchange students (96%) were in the age group of 16-18 years. The state of Utah hosted more than seven students, followed by the states of Michigan and Ohio (5 students each). Forty-five percent of the students represented Lex organization in Japan, followed by Labo (41%), and Utrek (14%).

Arrival and Departure Orientation

Prior to coming to the United States, 92% of the students indicated that they were interviewed by their home country youth organizations, and 98% attended orientation before leaving the home country. Similarly, 98% received orientation about high school in the U.S., and 88% indicated that the orientation was very useful. However, only one-half of the students reported they were well prepared for the program.

4-H Exchange Program Expectation

A substantial majority of exchange students indicated that the 4-H exchange program met their expectations relative to host family (78.4%), school (72.5%), and local coordinator (60.8%). Results are shown in Table 1. However, exchange students were somewhat skeptical about their expectations relative to social and community activities (54.9%) and program support (49.0%).

Table 1.
Students' Expectations of the 4-H Exchange Program

Program Component	Yes	No	Total
Host family	40 (78.4%)	11 (21.6%)	51 (100%)
School	37 (72.5%)	14 (27.5%)	51 (100%)
Local coordinator	31 (60.8%)	20 (39.2%)	51 (100%)
Social and community activities	28 (54.9%)	23 (45.1%)	51 (100%)
Program support	25 (49.0%)	26 (51.0%)	51 (100%)

Host Family Expectations

Host families welcome the Japanese youth into their homes "as a family member," encouraging youth to participate in the daily activities and lives of the host family and community.

Students reported very positive experiences with the host families. Only five students (10.0%) reported that they had to change host families, while 90% stayed with the same host family throughout the program. On a three-point scale (1=never to 3=always), students indicated that they "always" had good relationships with host families (M=2.69) and that they received support from host families in adjusting to the new environment (M=2.72) and communicating with host families (M=2.74). Ninety-four percent of the students were aware that host families did not receive any monetary benefit to host them.

Table 2.
Students' Expectations of Host Families

Program Component	Number	Mean*	Sd
Good relationship with host family	45	2.69	0.47

Host family helped in adjusting to the new surroundings	50	2.72	0.50
Able to communicate with host family	49	2.74	0.49
*Scale: 1=never, 2=sometimes, and 3=always			

Program Coordinators

The Program Coordinator manages the exchange program at the state level. Responsibilities include matching host families to Japanese youth; arranging for enrollment in the area public school system; providing arrival and debriefing orientations for Japanese youth and host families; visiting the Japanese youth, host family, and schools; negotiating concerns between the youth and United States participants; and communicating any problems to the appropriate persons at the national level.

Students indicated that program coordinators were very helpful to the exchange students. Program coordinators maintained regular contacts with exchange students through a variety of channels. Examples include frequent contacts via telephone (67%), home visits (49%), group travel (37%), social settings (29%), and schools (27%). Exchange students were very positive regarding help and assistance provided by the program coordinators. As shown in Table 3, 67% of exchange students indicated that coordinators were there for them when they needed help, were friendly and approachable (87%), were fair-minded and objective (77%), and were able to see the student's point of view (72.3%).

Table 3.
Program Coordinator Assessment

Program Coordinator	Yes	Somewhat	No	Total
Understood roles and responsibilities	33 (63.5%)	14 (26.9%)	5 (9.6%)	52 (100%)
Available when needed help and advice	35 (67.3%)	12 (23.1%)	5 (9.6%)	52 (100%)
Friendly and approachable	45 (86.5%)	6 (11.5%)	5 (9.6%)	52 (100%)
Fair-minded and objective	34 (77.3%)	6 (13.6%)	4 (9.1%)	44 (100%)
Helped me to see my host family point of view	34 (72.3%)	8 (17.0%)	5 (10.6%)	47 (100%)

School and Community Service

Ninety-eight percent of the exchange students indicated that they liked the high school. Classes were difficult for nearly 61% of the students, while 55% of the students needed some extra help. Most students (77%) reported that they enjoyed school and community service and were able to make friends and participate in various community activities and events (92%).

Overall 4-H Exchange Experience

Sixty-seven percent of the students reported that their overall 4-H experience as "excellent," while 29% said "good." The service received from 4-H, friendliness, and professionalism were also rated high by students (35% excellent, 48% good). Seventy-one percent indicated that they would recommend 4-H exchange to others in their home country, while 27% said "maybe." As a result of participating in 4-H Exchange program, exchange students agreed (on a scale, 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) that they understand 1) intercultural sensitivity (M=4.08) and 2) global perspectives (4.42).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, the 4-H Japanese Exchange program had a positive experience on students. Students gave high ratings for arrival and departure orientations. Students also indicated that the 4-H exchange program met their expectations relative to host family, school, and local coordinator.

Almost all students liked the high school. However, quite a number of students (a little over one-half) indicated that classes were difficult and they needed extra help. Students enjoyed school and community service and were able to make friends and participate in various community activities and events. Perhaps the language coupled with cultural adjustment to the new school environment may have contributed to school difficulty experienced by exchange students. Further research is needed to identify factors or issues that make school activities difficult for students. Program coordinators should visit with school officials and host families to address this issue.

An overwhelming majority of students indicated that they would recommend 4-H exchange program to others in their home country. However, findings should be viewed with caution because visiting exchange students may not like to report negative perceptions about the host families.

During these times when war between and among countries has become an on-going event, exchange programs provide positive opportunities for young people to make friends with those in other parts of the world. Additionally, our increasingly global economy will require that more and more workers of the future have the skills to relate effectively with those from other cultures.

As our world becomes more globally conscious, a greater number of exchange programs may be pursued. There is a paucity of research literature that focuses on organized exchange programs and its impact. A need exists to systematically document outcomes of exchange programs. Further, the results of this study may be useful to other organizations that deal with foreign student exchanges with high school students. The events of September 11 have created an even greater urgency and the need to understand the roles we all have to play for a better, safer, and peaceful world.

The 17 personal characteristics examined by Hansel and Grove should be used as a framework to develop an assessment tool for evaluating the impact of exchange programs. In addition, contemporary research relative to impact of exchange programs should be reviewed to select outcome measures.

Host families are the heart and soul of the exchange program. The impact of exchange programs on host families should be examined and documented. Findings from such studies will be of immense value in preparing host families for the exchange program as well as making programmatic improvements relative to the roles and functions of host families.

A follow-up survey of all 4-H Japanese Exchange program participants will be of immense value in assessing the impact of 4-H Japanese Exchange program on later life experiences and on global awareness and understanding.

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