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Establishing an Agribusiness Study- Abroad Course in Mexico: A Project in Internationalizing the Curriculum

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Study abroad provides students with a cross-cultural experience and a new perspective on the global marketplace. Seven students from the University of Georgia enrolled in the first agribusiness study-abroad course, entitled “International Agribusiness Marketing and Management: Focus on Mexico,” at the Universidad Veracruzana in Xalapa during the Maymester 2000. Their curriculum included field trips to agribusinesses, Spanish classes and lectures on Mexican business culture, and NAFTA. As a result, students became more comfortable in cross-cultural environments and more confident in their academic and professional abilities.

Key Words: agribusiness, curriculum development, study abroad

The globalization of agribusiness through strategic alliances in international food processing, retailing, and foreign direct investment necessitates a critical examination of the undergraduate agribusiness curriculum to determine whether departments and colleges are meeting the needs of students as future employees in the global marketplace. The evidence for internationalizing the curriculum is clear. On average, 25% of all U.S. agricultural products are exported. Food and fiber imports accounted for \$38 billion in 1999, while exports were valued at \$48 billion [U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), 2000]. Canada and Mexico account for 33% and 34%, respectively, of U.S. agricultural imports and exports. Foreign ownership of retail food distribution companies is also well known. Six of the top ten global food processing firms are American based, while the largest firm, Nestlé, is Swiss based (Reed, 2001, pp. 178–180). Clearly, the profitability of the agribusiness sector is closely tied to trade and global financial markets.

The expansion of agricultural trade between the U.S. and Mexico, NAFTA, and the growth of the Hispanic community in the American labor, consumer, and financial markets are the primary reasons why agribusiness majors need a cross-cultural experience in their programs of study. When firms, and their employees, appreciate the importance of understanding cross-cultural communications in business negotiations, marketing, and sales, opportunities flourish.

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Objectives

The objectives of this paper are to: (1) describe the goals and objectives of an international agribusiness study-abroad course; (2) evaluate the instructional experience of the initial course; and (3) analyze the outcomes of the course within the context of departmental, college, and university curriculum goals. This case study should provide a model for developing other study-abroad programs within the context of meeting agribusinesses' needs for employees who appreciate the global marketplace.

Growth of the Hispanic Community

Mexico is the third most important market for U.S. food and fiber exports and imports. The total value of agricultural trade between the two countries exceeded \$13 billion in 2000. The agribusiness community has not ignored the explosive growth of the Hispanic community in the U.S., both as a labor force and as a market for food and fiber products. Camarota (1999) reported 26.3 million foreign-born persons in the U.S. Of this number, 13.4 million came from Latin America and 53% of these from Mexico alone.

By 2010, Hispanics will comprise 15.5% of the U.S. population, with a buying power estimated at \$350 billion nationwide and growing at approximately 7.5% per annum over the past decade (Holsendoph, 1998). Population projections in the mid-90s indicated that Georgia, for example, could expect a net increase of 670,000 Hispanic immigrants by the end of the decade, many of them working in agricultural production, food processing, carpet manufacturing, and construction, as well as opening numerous small businesses in the southeast.

The growing Hispanic community represents an opportunity for financial growth in the banking sector for entrepreneurs willing to extend services to different clientele. However, these opportunities may not be realized if lending officers at financial institutions are insensitive to Hispanic customer needs or lack cross-cultural communication skills. In early 2000, Gainesville Bank and Trust opened Banco Familiar, a bank branch designed to cater specifically to the growing number of Hispanic customers in Gainesville, Georgia. A year earlier, a Hispanic group founded United Americas Bank to serve the Latino community in North Atlanta (Billips, 2001, p. 155). Many of the bank's primary customers are Hispanic entrepreneurs seeking loans for start-up enterprises. Access to capital at competitive rates is an important catalyst for these small businesses.

Cross-Cultural Education

Are colleges and universities adequately preparing students for cultural differences in the global marketplace? In a national survey of agribusinesses and agencies, Litzenberg and Schneider (1987) reported interpersonal and communications skills

ranked highest among desirable characteristics for new agribusiness management employees. Computer, quantitative, and management information skills and previous work experience ranked fifth and sixth, respectively, among the broad categories of desirable employee characteristics. Although their survey data did not reveal a strong concern for international issues, Litzenberg and Schneider concluded that, as departments and colleges redesign their curricula, a focus on demand analysis, market development, and international comparative advantage is imperative (p. 1035). Based on their survey findings, the authors also emphasize that agribusiness graduates should have a basic understanding of trade theory, capital markets, marketing systems, and international institutions.

In a more recent survey conducted by Wolf and Schaffner (2000), agribusiness executives ranked *good ethics, strong communications skills, ability to be trained on the job, general business knowledge, and computer expertise* as the most desirable skills for new employees (p. 62). In the second tier of desirable skills, executives ranked general marketing knowledge, understanding of international economics, and knowledge of international cultures and customs as very desirable. They ranked region-specific specializations and international internships as less desirable than the primary business skills. Executives rated *strong personal and excellent communications skills* higher than specialized knowledge.

In evaluating courses taken by recent college graduates, agribusiness executives ranked the principles of marketing, accounting, finance, and business in a global environment collectively as the four most important topics among 27 potential subjects. Agribusiness executives' comments about the international agribusiness curriculum can be summarized as follows:

It [the curriculum] should examine the effects of currency fluctuations, distribution obstacles, and tariff and trade barriers on trade, as well as *the impact of culture and the art of negotiation in completing any successful transaction* (Wolf and Schaffner, 2000, p. 65; italics added for emphasis).

Evelyne Feltz, director of In Lingua, an international language training center for business managers, noted, "Culture is not to be ignored.... You could make [a] faux pas or mistake and offend someone and make them not want to do business with you" (Mallory, 2000, p. R5). Cultural awareness clearly enhances business activities. As successful community banks have demonstrated, offering bilingual tellers and public service staff in a culturally sensitive environment can lead to a dramatic increase in customers, deposits, and lending activities from people who previously distrusted impersonal institutions (Billips, 2001, pp. 157 and 162).

While study-abroad courses were not specifically included in the international agribusiness curriculum, the skills and experiences of a well-designed study-abroad course can complement the academic content of the core courses and provide a realistic cross-cultural experience within the context of international agribusiness marketing and management needs. Cross-cultural experiences may include lectures by host country business faculty, government development officers, and international business managers. A home-stay environment with host families and formal

language and cultural classes can complement and enhance students' other cross-cultural learning experiences. These activities would reinforce textbook materials on the important aspects of cross-cultural communications in the global business environment.

University of Georgia Goals and Objectives for Study Abroad

University of Georgia President, Michael F. Adams, recognized the impact of globalization on Georgia's economy and the need for cross-cultural education in his 2001 State of the University address. He pointed out that Georgia's exports exceeded \$11.9 billion in the first three quarters of 2000, up 7% from the same period in 1999. Economic growth in the export sector represents an important opportunity for the University's graduates. President Adams, citing the response of the vice president of a major pharmaceutical firm about his preference for additional specialized training or a semester abroad experience for new employees, related that the pharmaceutical company executive answered, without hesitation, "the student with the overseas experience" (Adams, 2001, p. D).

The University of Georgia (UGA) has responded to the need for more international experiences for its students by encouraging more study-abroad opportunities. Three years ago, when President Adams took over leadership of the university, only 2% of the university's undergraduates had participated in a meaningful international experience. By May 2000, 10% of the graduating class reported an international experience on their resumé. President Adams has raised the goal to 20% for all UGA graduates (Adams, 2001, p. D).

The School of Social Work (SSW) and the College of Education (COE) at the University of Georgia have already recognized the need for a cross-cultural experience for their students, due to the explosive growth of Hispanic children in the state's school system and social service outreach programs for Latino families in the community. The University of Georgia and the Universidad Veracruzana had established programs in language training, cultural immersion, internship, and joint social science research based on a memorandum of agreement signed in 1991. In 1992, the School of Social Work initiated joint educational programs with the Universidad Veracruzana (UV) in Xalapa, Mexico (see UGA, Office of International Development, 2000).

Subsequently, the College of Education developed a course entitled "Understanding Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Schools," and in May 1999, initiated a study-abroad course at UV. In June 1999, a summer school program for 20 public school teachers from Gainesville, Georgia, focusing on cross-cultural issues, was taught at UV. Hall County and Gainesville, the county seat, have a rapidly growing Hispanic population who provide more than 50% of the labor force in area poultry processing plants. Their children attend public schools, while family members need access to public services. Education and social work faculty recognized that teachers

and social service workers needed cross-cultural training to better serve the Hispanic community.

Many public schools, police departments, and social service agencies are taking a more proactive approach to meeting the needs of their Hispanic communities. Hispanics became the leading ethnic group in Dalton and surrounding Whitfield County in the 1990s, with dramatic impacts on the school system and community. In 1990, Hispanics constituted only 3.9% of the Dalton public school population, but by the end of the decade they accounted for 51.5% of all students (Salzer, 2001, p. A1). In some elementary schools, Hispanics now account for 80% of the students. The Monterrey Exchange Program, or “Dalton Project,” brought teachers from Mexico to advise local teachers and public school administrators on how to improve education for Hispanic children. Subsequently, school principals and teachers have traveled to Mexico for cross-cultural training and to learn about the origins of their students (Salzer, 2001, p. A16).

In Marietta, Georgia, the city police department has recruited Hispanic officers. Alpharetta, Georgia, has launched “workplace Spanish” classes for 350 employees who have frequent contact with the Hispanic community. Ranging from maintenance workers to department heads, classes for these employees create a more cross-culturally sensitive environment for the clientele of public service agencies (Blevins, 2001, p. A8; Stepp, 2001, p. B1).

While the UGA College of Education and the School of Social Work initiated cross-cultural training, the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CAES) did not have a study-abroad course dealing with our closest neighbor, despite an increasing dependence on a Hispanic agricultural labor force for Vidalia onions, peaches, poultry, dairy, and vegetable production, as well as a growing food and fiber trade with Mexico (Tamman, 2001, p. D1). Moreover, Broder (1997) found that CAES students ranked internationalization of agriculture the least important policy issue, despite growing evidence of agribusiness globalization (p. 32).

To address the changing curriculum needs of Georgia’s agribusiness graduates, CAES faculty and the director of the School for Foreign Students at UV submitted a joint International Academic Program Development Fund proposal to the Office of International Education at the University of Georgia to plan and initiate a study-abroad course entitled “International Agribusiness Marketing and Management: Focus on Mexico.” The course has subsequently been offered in May and June of 2000 and 2001. Students earned three semester hours of credit the first year, but credit offered was increased to six semester hours in the second year with the addition of an environmental management component.

Agribusiness Study Abroad in Xalapa, Mexico

The “Focus on Mexico” study-abroad course began with a pre-departure introduction to Mexican history and politics. The one-day session included a documentary on Mexican history, reading assignments, and classroom discussions. A textbook on

international marketing and a collection of 20 articles on the Mexican economy and society were required reading. Upon arrival in Xalapa, the capital of Veracruz State, the students were met by representatives of the School for Foreign Students (EEE) at the Universidad Veracruzana along with their host families. Their cross-cultural experience began immediately. The next morning students met for a welcoming ceremony, an orientation session at the school, and a walking tour of the city's center and markets.

The formal instructional program began at 8 a.m. the following morning with a series of field trips to Mexican and global agribusinesses in the surrounding area, two hours of Spanish language and Mexican culture classes at mid-day, and lectures by Mexican faculty and state/local government officials in the evenings. Students ate lunch, the main daily meal, with their host families after their language/culture classes.

Agribusiness field trips included guided visits to coffee plantations and processing facilities, dairy plants (Nestlé), and specialized tropical fruit production and processing facilities for mangos, papaya, passion fruit, and Persian limes. A joint Spanish-Mexican mushroom enterprise (Ñiojal) supplying Domino's Pizza and a local cannery illustrated the role of venture capital in the growing Mexican economy. At each agribusiness, plant managers or their designated specialists provided information on the history of the enterprise and its niche in the Mexican and global market.

In the evening, Mexican faculty and government officials provided specialized lectures on the economy, including land reform, the status of small-scale farmers, rural-urban migration, export-import promotion, and financing. The lecture series began with a special presentation by Professor Raul Rivadeneyra, School of Management, who outlined the importance of establishing personal relationships in Mexican business culture. The highlight of the lecture series was a student-led discussion of the problems of promoting and marketing Mexican coffee in the global arena. The director of the Bancomex's export promotion division in Veracruz completed the series of special presentations.¹

An understanding of the cultural component of international agribusiness is critical to the success of the study-abroad course. Students are expected to learn how different cultural practices contribute to successful international marketing and management. In his written testimonial about his study-abroad experience, Ildemaro Volcan confirms our well-organized course met that objective:

I was able to learn, understand and analyze the [Mexican] infrastructure on both the social and business level.... The way we attacked this issue was to discuss Mexican business practices, Mexican wage structure, social practices, and economics/politics. Mexican business practices are very different.... Personal relationships play the biggest role when it comes to making a business deal.... To survive and be successful, "**trust**" must be created before any business is ever mentioned.... Personal relationships lay the foundation for commerce to advance (Volcan, 2000, p. 1).

¹ The course syllabus for "International Agribusiness Marketing and Management: Focus on Mexico" can be found online at <http://www.agecon.uga.edu/xalapa/itinerary.html>.

After the students returned to the University of Georgia, they completed their final writing assignments and exams, and made individual power-point presentations on a topic of their choice, such as environmental management in Mexican fruit and vegetable production, shade-grown versus full-sun coffee cultivation, mushroom production processing and marketing, or ecotourism. The objective of the final two-day session was to teach students how to articulate their study-abroad experience in an oral presentation, complemented by audio-visual facilities. The final session was attended by college administrators, faculty advisors, and specialists from the Cooperative Extension Service. Private individuals who had donated to the College's development foundation from which some students received their travel scholarships also attended the presentations.

Results

An assessment of student, faculty, and institutional benefits includes effective and cognitive skills. Students certainly have a greater appreciation and empathy for cross-cultural communications and experiences, as demonstrated in their letters to host families and Mexican faculty. The cognitive benefits include a better understanding of the Mexican business culture and environment. Students also developed cross-cultural communications skills which will benefit them in their professional growth, whether it involves other cultures or working in their own community.

Students gained a new understanding of and respect for Mexican agribusinesses, from the simple family farmers to the export-oriented, joint-capital ventures in fruits, vegetables, mushrooms, dairy products, and coffee. They also have acquired a better understanding of comparative advantage in global agriculture, the impact of NAFTA on both sides of the border, as well as a new-found interest in international affairs.

Faculty reaped similar benefits, which can be manifest within and outside of the classroom. Institutional benefits included a recognition that faculty have developed cross-cultural skills and a deeper understanding of the challenges in global marketing and trade. That recognition will benefit the College as it prepares to address cultural diversity in its teaching, research, and public service missions and in the Georgia agribusiness sector.

Results of the study-abroad courses are not limited to the experience itself. They also have a multiplier effect on the students' career opportunities. Students who participated in the initial study-abroad course have subsequently utilized their cross-cultural experiences to expand their international education through internships, employment opportunities, or career development activities.

Two agribusiness students complemented their study-abroad experience by participating in a summer internship program, Export Ag, directed by the Business Outreach Services at the University of Georgia. Interns worked with private food processing companies to develop export marketing plans under the supervision of a Public Service Associate. Without their prior study-abroad experience, interns would not

have been aware of the importance of cultural business practices in export sales. Forty-three percent of the initial program's students utilized their study-abroad experience to qualify immediately for extended training programs in export marketing which would not have been as productive for them without their prior international experience.

While these short-term benefits are relatively easy to identify, the long-term contribution to the students' career growth is an important product of the study-abroad experience. For example, one student has already secured a trainee position with the U.S. Foreign Agricultural Service in Caracas, Venezuela, while another student utilized his study-abroad experience to qualify for an extended internship in Chile and later in Japan.

Conclusions

This study-abroad course is consistent with the objectives of Chancellor Stephen R. Portch and the Board of Regents to raise international education to a new level within the mainstream of the University System of Georgia's strategic plan. Nevertheless, college and university administrators express mixed views of study-abroad courses. These views are generally favorable, as long as the activities are an integral part of the college and departmental mission statements or academic programs. David A. Knauff, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, observed the final student presentations and course evaluations. He concluded, "The students we interviewed were most enthusiastic about the quality of their experience and felt that it was the most meaningful educational experience they had at the University of Georgia" (Knauff, 2001).

Clearly, faculty have also gained valuable experience in cross-cultural education, international marketing and trade, and in implementing joint instructional and research activities with their Mexican counterparts. Invitations to participate in joint research on Mexican agricultural issues have opened up opportunities for further faculty collaboration and development. Members of the Georgia agribusiness community have likewise recognized the value of closer ties between UGA and Mexican institutions by offering human resource managerial internships to U.S. and Mexican bilingual graduates in the poultry industry.

Implications for Other Institutions

The critical factors necessary for any successful study-abroad course include faculty and student interest, institutional support, and resources for program sustainability. Faculty interest in global issues (marketing, trade policy, and the environment) is a key factor in initiating a study-abroad course. Moreover, faculty must communicate—through promotional materials such as power-point presentations to clubs, classes, and administrators—how students will benefit from a study-abroad experience before they commit their resources to developing a course. Studying in another

language and culture, in a wide range of formal and informal settings, develops a level of maturity through a learning environment that is nearly impossible to duplicate in the traditional classroom setting. However, the cost in faculty time and effort is higher than similar domestic programs.

The recognition and rewards systems at the department, college, and university levels must be a consideration before faculty decide to organize and teach a non-traditional course. If the annual evaluations are limited to a narrow criteria, such as publication records reported on yearly Cooperative State Research Education and Extension forms, then faculty will be neither recognized nor rewarded for their creative instructional efforts. In a major research-oriented institution such as the University of Georgia, recognition may not be forthcoming until professional papers and refereed journal articles appear in print several years later.

Travel scholarships, and administrative and curriculum support are also critical elements for a successful study-abroad program. The College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences provided travel scholarships which offset the cost of airfare to Mexico from foundation funds for the initial agribusiness class. The Office of International Agriculture also provided faculty travel support. In many study-abroad programs, travel expenses for faculty must come from students' fees, which can create financial problems and raise program costs. Institutional support can come from the President's office in the form of public announcements articulating the goals for internationalizing curriculum, but this may or may not include financial support for these activities.

University system financial and accounting regulations may impede the smooth flow of international activities, including study-abroad courses. Since separate financial accounts have to be maintained for study-abroad courses, paperwork requirements can become excessive. Balancing these accounts to the satisfaction of university accountants can take from six months to a year, due to such things as missing receipts, currency exchange forms, and Byzantine university accounting procedures. These paper-shuffling impediments reached the absurd when university officials asked faculty members to declare that "family members received no imputed value" for tax purposes if spouses or other family members accompanied them on study-abroad travel (Cleveland, 2000).

The sustainability of study-abroad courses is of paramount concern. Certainly, President Michael F. Adams has endorsed the experience as a goal for the University. Study-abroad courses require significantly more work, time, and effort than standard pedagogical activities. Program directors need to be in constant communication with prospective students, organize marketing efforts, complete extensive paperwork, and maintain relationships with study-abroad hosts and institutions. Program sustainability must be institutionalized rather than depend completely on the involvement of specific individuals. While this case is a faculty-led model of study-abroad programming, Keitges (1995) recommends a consortium model of exchange program administration as being more cost effective for mature programs (pp. 30–31).

The importance of endowments for travel scholarships cannot be overlooked. Without financial support from enlightened benefactors, who have established

foundation accounts and donated money earmarked for undergraduate international travel, this study-abroad opportunity would not have been possible.

Despite these obstacles, the study-abroad experience can be an unsurpassed learning activity, with substantial benefits in cross-cultural education for students and faculty, preparing both for more productive careers in the global marketplace.

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