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COURSE IN MEXICO: A PROJECT IN
INTERNATIONALIZING THE CURRICULUM

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Glenn C.W. Ames and Jack E. Houston (*)

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(*) Professor and Associate Professor, respectively, Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics, The University of Georgia, 315 Conner Hall, Athens, GA 30602-7509; Phone: (706) 542 0757; Fax: (706) 542 0739;
Email: games@agecon.uga.edu or jhouston@agecon.uga.edu

College of Agricultural & Environmental Sciences
Department of Agricultural & Applied Economics
The University of Georgia

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ABSTRACT

Study abroad provides students with a cross-cultural experience and a new perspective on the global market place. Seven students from the University of Georgia enrolled in an initial course entitled , International Agribusiness Marketing and Management: Focus on Mexico, at the University 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 confident in their abilities.

Key words: Study Abroad, Curriculum Development, Agribusiness

JEL codes: A29 - Teaching of Economics

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INTRODUCTION

The globalization of agribusiness through strategic alliances in international food processing, retailing, and foreign direct investment necessitates a critical review of the undergraduate agribusiness curriculum to determine how departments and colleges are meeting the needs of students as future employees in the international marketplace. The evidence for internationalizing the curriculum is clear. On the average, 25 percent 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 (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, while the largest firm, Nestlé, is Swiss (Reed 2001, pp. 178-180). Clearly, the profitability of the agribusiness sector is closely tied to trade and global financial markets, as recent events in Asia have demonstrated.

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, sales and other activities, opportunities flourish.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this paper are to: (1) describe the goals and objectives of the 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 market place.

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 \$13.0 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). 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.

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 small business entrepreneurs.

CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION

Are colleges and universities adequately preparing students for participation in the global marketplace? When the Agribusiness Department at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, designed a new curriculum to serve agribusinesses in the global environment, faculty and agribusiness leaders identified the skills and courses needed to strengthen their students' training and preparation for their employment by import/export firms. While many skills were already addressed in the core agribusiness curriculum, surveys of agribusiness executives and academic advisors indicated a need for an international core concentration (Wolf and Schaffner 2000).

Agribusiness executives ranked *good ethics, strong communication skills, ability to be trained on the job, general business knowledge, and computer expertise*, as the most desirable skills for new employees (Wolf and Schaffner 2000, 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. Executives rated *strong personal and excellent communications skills* higher than specialized knowledge.

In evaluating courses taken by recent college graduates, the principles of marketing, accounting, finance, and business in a global environment were ranked as the fourth most important topics among 27 potential subjects. The following statement summarizes executives' comments about the international agribusiness curriculum. "It [international agribusiness] 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). The resulting international agribusiness concentration includes six required courses and one elective covering global agricultural marketing and trade, cross-cultural communications and management, international finance, and logistics in the global marketplace. One elective may be selected from anthropology, history, humanities, and foreign languages.

While study abroad courses were not specifically included in the international agribusiness curriculum, the skills and experiences of a well-designed 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. As Evelyne Feltz, director of In Lingua, an international language training center for business 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). On the other hand, 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 banks and other impersonal institutions (Billips 2001, p.157 & p.162).

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 cited statistics indicating 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 clearly represents an opportunity for the University's graduates. President Adams quoted the vice president of a major pharmaceutical firm about his preference for additional specialized training or semester abroad experience for new employees. The manager answered "...unhesitating: The student with the overseas experience" (Adams 2001, p. D).

The University of Georgia (UGA) has responded to the need for more international experience for its students by encouraging more study abroad opportunities. Ten percent of the graduating class of May 2000 had an international experience on their resumes. President Adams has raised the goal to 20% for UGA graduates (Adams 2001, p. D).

The School of Social Work (SSW) and the College of Education (COE) have already recognized the need for a cross-cultural experience for their students, due to the explosive growth of Hispanic children in the school system and social-service outreach programs for Latino families in the community. In 1992, the School of Social Work

initiated joint educational programs with the Universidad Veracruzana (UV) in Xalapa, Mexico. Subsequently, the COE 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, GA, focusing on cross-cultural issues, was taught at UV. Gainesville and surrounding Hall county have a rapidly growing Hispanic population who provide more than 50% of the labor force in the poultry processing plants. Their children attend public schools, while family members need access to public services. Therefore, teachers and social service workers, need cross-cultural training to better meet the needs of the Hispanic community.

Many public schools, police departments and social service agencies are taking a more proactive approach to meeting the needs of the Hispanic community. In northeast Georgia, the “Dalton Project” brought teachers from Mexico to advise local teachers and public school administrators on how to improve education for Hispanic children. 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, creating a more cross-culturally sensitive environment for public service agencies (Blevins 2001, p. A8; Stepp 2001, p. B1).

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 students in the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences ranked internationalization of agriculture the least important policy issue for them, despite growing evidence of agribusiness globalization (p. 32). In order to address the changing curriculum needs of Georgia's agribusiness graduates, CAES faculty and a Mexican exchange scholar wrote a joint International Academic Program Development Fund proposal to plan and initiate a study abroad course entitled "International Agribusiness Marketing and Management: Focus on Mexico" for the 1999-2000 academic year. The course was subsequently offered in May and June 2000.

AGRIBUSINESS STUDY ABROAD IN XALAPA, MEXICO

Our 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 and an orientation session at the school.

Our instructional program was organized around a series of field trips to Mexican and global agribusinesses in the mornings, 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. The 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, supplying Domino's Pizza, 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, and export-import promotion and financing. The lecture series began with a special presentation by Professor Raul Rivadeneyra, Faculty of Administrative and Social Sciences, who outlined the importance of establishing personal relationships in Mexican business culture. The highlight of the lecture series was a student-lead 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. The syllabus can be found online (Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics).

Upon the students' return to the University of Georgia, they completed their final writing assignments, exams, and made individual power-point presentations on an enterprise aspect of their study abroad experience. The objective of the final two-day session was to teach students to articulate their study abroad experience in an oral

presentation, complemented by audio-visual facilities, on the most respective activities of their three-week course within the context of international marketing and management. The final session was attended by college administrators, faculty advisors, and specialists from the Cooperative Extension Service working in cross-cultural outreach programs with the Hispanic labor force in Georgia.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

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 students exploited their study abroad experience during their summer internship, ExportAg, 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 as cognizant of U.S. trade with Mexico which is the U.S.'s, third largest trading partner and most important market in Latin America.. Another intern utilized his study abroad experience to qualify for an extended summer internship in Chile and another subsequent internship in Japan. Forty-three percent of the initial students utilized their study abroad experience immediately to qualify for extended training programs which would not have been available to them otherwise.

Mr. Ildemaro Volcan, one of the participating agribusiness students, succinctly described the benefits of the agribusiness study abroad course at the Universidad Vercruzana in his Certificate for International Agriculture report. "When our department

announced the opportunity to be part of an exchange program in International Agribusiness Marketing and Management focusing on Veracruz, Mexico, my eyes lit up. I saw an opportunity to advance my knowledge on various aspects of Mexican history, culture, business practices and awareness of how competitive [Mexicans] ... are in ... global markets when it comes to agriculture.... 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).

Ildemaro’s observations on the value of his cross cultural experience appear substantiated by academic administrators. David A. Knauft, the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, observed the final student presentations and course evaluation. He concluded that “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” (Knauft 2001).

While some academic administrators have praised the accomplishments of study abroad programs, others have been more critical. Richard C. Sutton, Director of International Programs, University System of Georgia Board of Regents, criticized study abroad programs for their lack of focus, accountability, and disconnected from the

academic curricula and degree programs, “championing experience over education” Sutton (2000, p. 2). On the other hand, David Coker, former Associate Provost for International Affairs of the University of Georgia, recognized the benefits of international travel and study abroad. After their travel and study abroad experience, students “...are more comfortable with others, more confident with themselves and more competent in what they do”(Lee 2000, p.17). The Focus on Mexico Course answered some of Sutton’s criticism. Certainly, the course had focus on agribusiness marketing and management through its emphasis on Mexican history, language and culture, business practices, as well as economic and social policies. Academics and cultural experiences were addressed in formal lectures, seminars, field trips, and home stay living arrangements.

Testimonials to the value of the cross-cultural experience, especially the home stay living arrangement, can be gleaned from the students’ letters of appreciation which were addressed to their families and Mexican faculty. Micky G. Ragsdale, a graduate student in Agricultural Leadership in Education and Communication, commented that “... what was learned in Mexico could be applied to life here in the United States....I felt that the most important part of this class was the home stay program” (Ragsdale June 6, 2000). Adam Smith, an agribusiness student, wrote in glowing terms of his home stay experience to his host family. “The meals, gifts, conversation, and love will never be forgotten. It means so much to me that a family would take in a complete stranger and treat him as if he were part of the family... I learned so much from everyone and I will be able to use this [experience] for the rest of my life” (Smith June 7, 2000).

Students also expressed their appreciation to the Mexican faculty for their interest in the students and guidance in cross-cultural understanding. Ildemaro Volcan reflected on the contribution that Professor Raul Rivadeneyra made to the success of his study abroad experience. Professor Rivadeneyra certainly had an impact on the students' cross-cultural experience, beyond his formal lectures on Mexican business practices, prompting Ildemaro to write, " thanks for the opportunity you have given me to pursue both my academic and personal growth. Without your help, support, sacrifice and trust, I would not have gotten the experience that up to date has changed my life, both in my personal and professional views...[and] ... provided me with [problem] solving ... skills that were never tested until then" (Volcan June 7, 2000). Leanne Stalvey and other students expressed similar sentiments about the contribution of Professor Rivadeneyra to the success of their study abroad experience. "You did a great job.... I learned more in my three weeks in Mexico than I ever could have in a classroom setting. [My] ... experiences were a true eye-opener. I gained a new understanding of and respect for both Mexican ... and American agriculture that will no doubt benefit me in years to come and help me continue to expand my horizons. I have a new found interest in foreign affairs that I did not have before my trip to Mexico" (Stalvey June 6, 2000).

The students also articulated what Sutton (2000) called the "... concrete, tangible, and understandable ... value of what the study abroad experience does to students," during their final course presentations, interviews with Deans and Associate Deans, as well as during their summer internships. While these short-term benefits are relatively

easy to identify, the contribution to students' career growth should be forthcoming.

Ildemaro Volcan has already

secured a trainee position with the U.S. Foreign Agricultural Service in Caracas, Venezuela. Moreover, this study abroad course is consistent with Chancellor Stephen R. Portch and Board of Regents' objectives to raise international education to a new level within the mainstream of University System of Georgia's strategic plan.

Faculty 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 Georgia agribusiness community have also recognized the value of closer ties between the university and Mexican institutions by offering human resource managerial internships to U.S. and Mexican bilingual graduates in the poultry industry.

While departmental, college and university mission statements support international activities, the implementation is the responsibility of individual faculty members. University system financial and accounting regulations may impede the smooth flow of international activities, including study abroad courses. Paperwork requirements can become excessive when compared to similar domestic academic programs. These paper-shuffling requirements reached the ridiculous when university officials asked faculty members to declare that "family members received no imputed value" if spouses or other family members accompanied them on study abroad travel

(Cleveland 2000). Despite impediments, 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 market place.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER INSTITUTIONS

The critical factors necessary for any successful study abroad course include faculty and student interest, institutional support, learning assessment mechanisms, and resources for program sustainability. Faculty interest in global issues-marketing, trade, policy and the environment-is a critical factor in initiating a study abroad course. Moreover, faculty have to recognize why students benefit from a study abroad experience before they commit their resources to developing a course. Study abroad provides a learning environment that is nearly impossible to duplicate in the traditional classroom setting. Studying in another language and culture, in a wide range of formal and informal settings, develops a level of maturity that students may not have possessed before.

The recognition and rewards system at the department, college and university level have to 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 (CSREES) forms, then faculty will not be recognized nor rewarded for their creative instructional efforts.

Student interests are critical to the success of study abroad courses. As Broder (1997) noted, College of Agricultural and Environmental Science students ranked

internationalization of agriculture as the least important policy issue facing U.S. agriculture (p. 32). Students have to be “awakened” to the importance of globalization for local, state and national agribusiness. Recruitment becomes very important in the study abroad development process. Agribusiness courses have to compete with other courses and travel activities at university level study abroad fairs. Presentations to classes, student clubs, social events, and attractive posters are necessary to arouse student interest in study abroad activities. The most successful means of recruitment are personal contacts with faculty and former study abroad students.

Travel scholarships, administrative and curriculum support are also critical elements for a successful study abroad program. The College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences provided \$500 in travel scholarships for the initial Agribusiness class, which offset the cost of airfare to Mexico. The Office of International Agriculture also provided faculty travel support. In many study abroad programs, faculty have to “earn” their travel expenses from students’ fees, which can create problems for initial offerings. Institutional support can come from the President’s office in the form of public announcements articulating the goals for internationalizing curriculum. In addition, students are able to use their study abroad experience to partially fulfill their requirements for the Certificate of International Agriculture.

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. Faculty reaped similar benefits as students, which can be manifest in and outside of the classroom. Institutional benefits included a recognition that students and faculty have developed cross-cultural skills that will benefit the College as it prepares to address cultural diversity in the agribusiness sector. Certainly, the Dean and Associate Deans recognized the students' accomplishments when they attended their final presentations or interviewed them about their experiences later in the academic year.

The sustainability of study abroad courses is of paramount concern. Certainly President Michael 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 have to be in constant communications with prospective students, organize marketing efforts, complete extensive paperwork, and maintain relationships with study abroad hosts and institutions. Program sustainability has to be institutionalized rather than depend completely on the involvement of specific individuals. The relationship between the Universidad Veracruzana and the University of Georgia is expanding to include joint research on policy issues and public service needs of the Hispanic community both in the U.S. and Mexico. Finally, the importance of endowments for travel scholarships cannot be overlooked. Without financial support from enlightened benefactors, this study abroad opportunity would not have been possible.

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