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# **Teaching the Importance of the Global Economy through Travel Study Courses**

**Joey E. Mehlhorn, Sandy Mehlhorn, Scott Parrott, and Jeremy D'Antoni**  
**Agriculture, Geosciences, and Natural Resources**  
**University of Tennessee at Martin**

*Selected Paper prepared for presentation at the Southern Agricultural Economics  
Association Annual Meeting, Orlando, FL February 2-6, 2013*

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# **Teaching the Importance of the Global Economy Through Travel Study Courses**

## **Abstract**

Travel study courses can be used to enhance student understanding of international and cultural differences in agribusiness. The use of language immersion, industry tours, and service learning methods are affective ways to connect classroom teaching to real world application. Students become more culturally aware and prepared for industry.

## **Objectives**

This paper seeks to develop an effective methodology for teaching students the importance of the global economy and how it impacts their lives. Specific objectives include: (1) describing the development and selection of travel study projects; (2) comparing the impacts of language immersion, cultural experience, and reflection on student learning outcomes; (3) discussion of how a travel study experience can be used to enhance classroom teaching and the curriculum. The end result is a guideline to help instructors seeking to incorporate international content into their undergraduate agribusiness curriculums.

## **Background**

Today it is imperative that students entering the workforce understand the importance of the global economy on their career. Student's leaving college today face increasing competition for employment from both domestic and foreign sources. It is important for students to understand that they are no longer competing with the colleges across town or the students in their classes; they are competing in a global marketplace. The rise of global organizations without borders will need leaders who can adapt and thrive in different cultures (Jenkins, 2010). The importance of international understanding is heightened for students who plan to pursue a career in business related field.

Teachers need to expose students to the importance of international issues during the college experience. One common method for exposure is through travel study trips to international destinations, guest lecturers on international topics, and directed international focused coursework. Travel study trips have been shown to increase student awareness and importance of different worldviews (Lewis and Niesenbaum, 2005).

Faculty preparation is essential to the student learning process. Faculty who are considering development of an international travel study course should consider the time and energy required to make it successful. This includes faculty involvement in each step of the process from developing the curriculum to involvement in the international experience with students. Without a complete commitment, the program will face resistance from administrators, international partners, and host universities (Schmied and Shiba, 2007). Faculty who are involved in developing and leading travel study trips will also find that they are also impacted by the experience.

### **Data and Methods**

Three unique travel study programs are discussed and compared with respect to focus, student experiences, and faculty development issues. Each travel study consisted of students with fairly similar backgrounds (age, GPA, etc.) and career goals. Student surveys and journals were analyzed for common themes and changes in international perception.

#### **Travel study 1: Language Immersion (Guanajuato Mexico)**

Developing a language immersion travel study trip has unique issues when it comes to planning. Many students in college have limited secondary language skills when they enter college. Today, all students attending a public university in the state of

Tennessee are required to have completed two credits in a foreign language to be eligible to attend college. The foreign language requirement does help expose students to other cultures and language, but it has been the author's experience that most students retained very little from the high school language courses. As a result, it can be difficult to attract students to a language immersion travel study experience. When asked, many students stated that they did not have the time to take additional courses in a foreign language during their college program. The students at UT Martin who study agriculture are required to enroll in the freshman orientation course. During this course the importance of foreign language knowledge is covered among the freshman. The development of the language immersion travel study was advertised in the freshman studies course.

#### Development Issues with Language Immersion

Development of a language immersion travel study requires assistance from faculty in the foreign language department. The authors approached the faculty from the Modern Foreign Language department for assistance in the development of the trip. It is important to use the knowledge of the experts when planning a trip that requires language immersion, since many important details can only be organized by someone with specific knowledge of the language and country. The language immersion trip was scheduled for Guanajuato Mexico. The location was the Universidad of Guanajuato which had an existing exchange agreement with UT Martin. The exchange agreement simplified the process of credit transfer, housing, academic integrity of the program. Basically, the students paid the fees for the 4 week program to the university and all travel requirements and paperwork was handled by the university. As for faculty requirements in

development this program was the simplest to plan, but the most difficult to recruit students to participate.

### Student Responses to Language Immersion Trip

The language immersion focused trip resulted in the greatest cultural impact on the students as expressed through their journals and survey responses. This was expected since the students were focusing on language acquisition and the student journals reflected that the students felt the greatest sense of “not belonging” because of the language barrier and cultural differences they experienced. This provided excellent teaching moments on post trip review with students. It led to cultural perception shifts among the participants. Language immersion is not for all students and should not be thought of as the only benefit from travel study. It is important to balance language and culture immersion with academic specific training. In particular, agribusiness training and knowledge of international business were needed for further enhancements for future travel study programs.

### Travel study 2: Agricultural Industry (Saltillo Mexico)

A one week industry travel study trip was developed for agribusiness students to learn about the production and business practices of Mexican agriculture. A special emphasis was given towards learning about international trade relations with the United States and the perceptions of NAFTA among Mexican businesses. The industry travel study experience required the most faculty time in development. Logistics such as where to visit, lodging, transportation in country were all priorities in the planning stage. Again, the best solution was to turn to someone with knowledge of the area. The authors reached out to a university that had a partnership with UT Martin. The university that we

worked with was the Universidad of Antonio Narro (UAN) in Saltillo Mexico. UAN is an agriculture focused university which had similar student focus and resources as the University of Tennessee at Martin. Trip preparation started with having discussions with UAN faculty members about the potential visit approximately nine months prior to the planned trip. Deciding on the focus of the trip is critical to the success of the educational outcome. Defining your learning outcomes for the experience can serve as the guide to the development of the trip. The industry trip focus was international trade with the United States and production practices. The criteria given to the UAN faculty members were to help locate businesses that either imported or exported to the U.S. It was also important to visit with agribusinesses, government and educational officials, as well as local producers. The following is short list of example sites to visit.

- GBM Chemical (Mexican Biochemistry Group )
- Fuentes Ranch
- Tomato Greenhouse and export business
- UAN agriculture research station visit
- Museum of Dessert and educational center
- Tortilla factory
- Local bakery tours
- Universidad Autónoma del Noreste technology and innovation center lecture

Students were required to journal their experiences at each location. The diversity of the visits (ranging from small single owner businesses to large commercial operations) allowed students to see the vast differences among the business. A consistent comment among the student's journals was that the businesses and farms operated the same as in Tennessee. This was a revelation to most of the students since they assumed before the trip that all agriculture in Mexico was very small in nature. This provided a great teachable moment for the students to see that agriculture and business principles crossed

international boundaries. Business practices such as profit maximization, efficiency, and cost reduction techniques are truly universal.

Two weeks after the completion of the trip students meet again to debrief and discuss their experiences. This allowed to students time to reflect about the experience and share their journals, pictures, and surveys from the trip. The student responses were different from the pre-trip survey. The majority of students stated that Mexican agriculture was more advanced than they first perceived. The number of students willing to work in Mexico after the trip did increase from the pre-trip survey. However, all participants stated that they felt ill prepared for working or traveling in a foreign country due to the lack of language training. Students did see the importance of the gaining more language training and how such training could improve career prospects in international companies.

#### Results from Industry Travel Study Trip

The agriculture industry focused trip received the highest scores from students based on interest and subject matter. Students stated that their cultural awareness and desire to learn more about international issues improved. Students stated that their understanding of NAFTA and international trade issues was improved and that they had never considered trade issues from a foreign producer's perspective. This resulted in the most teachable moment from the entire trip.

#### Travel Study 3: Agribusiness-Focused (Olds Canada)

Planning the agribusiness focused trip to Canada was a simple process due to the partner university in Canada (Olds College). UT Martin has had a partnership agreement with Olds College for approximately 3 years. As a result, students can spend a semester



at either college as part of a student exchange program. Planning was similar to the Mexico travel study trip in that the educational outcomes needed to be determined before planning began. The focus for this trip was agribusiness industry and NAFTA. The students who attended this trip had enrolled and completed the international agriculture trade course the previous semester. The trip was an opportunity to expand on the course material to actually see the impact of trade agreements and how they affect businesses.

Technology and green industry was also a focus of the trip. The students were able to tour biofuels operations, composting facilities, and laboratories. A highlight for the trip included a tour of the Cargill beef processing facility and several large commercial feedlots. Students were required to journal their experiences for the trip and participate in all activities by asking questions and taking notes at each stop. It is important to have students take notes and ask questions. This is a good way to engage students in the learning process. Many times the students had very insightful questions and the business professionals were excited to speak with students about their career.

The actual travel study experience was made simple since the language barrier did not exist. Students stated that they did not feel culture shock upon arrival in Canada. Most students commented that it was very similar to home. The agriculture operations were large and very efficient. The students were very likely to be willing to return to Canada and work in the future if the opportunity was available.

#### Student Responses to the Travel Study

The agribusiness focused trip to Canada was very well received, but did not have the same cultural perception impacts as the trips to Mexico. This was expected, since the major culture barrier of language was not present. The students did report that their

understanding of Canadian agriculture did change. A common theme in the student journals focused on how student perceptions of size and scale of Canadian agriculture were changed from the experience. A great teachable moment came from the following student response; “American agriculture is not the only player in town. These Canadian producers are strong competition.” It is comments like this that open the door to increased dialog in the classroom.

### **Results and Implications**

Organizing effective travel study experiences takes effective planning on the part of the instructor. The amount of development time is impacted by the type of trip and the desired outcome from the experience. Travel study trips focusing on language immersion tend to take less pre trip planning, while industry focused trips require large amounts of time developing contacts and detailed scheduling. It is important to plan from the beginning what exactly is going to be the learning outcome of the trip. The goal should be to provide a learning experience that will increase the students understanding of the global marketplace and culture.

Travel study experiences open up opportunities for classroom discussion among students and instructors. Faculty who have led travel study programs are energized when they return to the classroom and are eager to share with their students. The author’s personal experiences with travel study certainly attest to the sense of excitement that comes from faculty experiencing international cultures and agricultural issues firsthand. As with most learning, experience is a great teacher. Students who participate in travel study courses share their experiences through presentations to area groups as well as classes on campus. Students become the best source of advertisement among their peers

for future travel study trip recruitment. They become ambassadors for increasing the dialog for the importance of international issues among fellow students.

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