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LEVERAGING INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL SCIENCE PROGRAMS

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Abstract

Global experiential learning and engagement facilitate learning opportunities to better understand the processes that shape global agricultural and food culture systems. This study had two objectives; the first was to integrate experiential learning, through partnerships with selected universities and institutions abroad, into students' education. The second was to enhance faculty and students' global learning, discovery, and engagement experiences. Seven students from Tuskegee University, and two students from Delaware State University, were provided an opportunity to visit three universities overseas, where they engaged in classroom discussions and other experiences. They participated in activities at other institutions, such as the Food Research Institute, Food and Drug Administration, and Standards Authority. They also participated in field activities, including visits to farms, food processing facilities, and cultural sites. These experiences provided a global context and deepened students' knowledge of food-related institutions, agricultural and farm processes, as well as relationships to chosen majors.

Keywords: Agricultural Science Programs, Experiential Learning, Historically Black Universities and Colleges, Intercultural Understanding, Minority Students

Introduction

Preparing the next generation of food, agriculture, natural resources, and human sciences (FANH) students at Historically Black Universities and Colleges (HBCUs) includes implementing strategies, such as strengthening international and intercultural perspectives to prepare students from underrepresented groups for FANH careers. The U.S. Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture (USDA NIFA) and other agencies provide support for higher education programs that seek to recruit, retain, train, and develop a highly skilled workforce of scientists and leaders. Also, academic institutions are encouraged to recruit and train more scientists from predominantly underserved communities in all aspects of agriculture and food-related disciplines to address the changing demographics in the U.S. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) estimates that underrepresented minorities, especially Latino Americans will make up a major proportion of the workforce by 2026. Consequently, 1890 Land-Grant Institutions, including Delaware State University and Tuskegee University, continually play leading roles in producing minority scientists who will advance agricultural research, education, and outreach to solve societal challenges. To accomplish this goal, unique programs must be developed and implemented to increase the recruitment, retention, and employability of minority graduates. Such efforts require collaborations with internal and external partners that strengthen and promote FANH training, both in the classroom and through projects that ensure student preparedness for global competitiveness.

International experiential learning opportunities, such as study abroad programs, are valuable and strategically important to a student's academic and professional career, preparing students to compete in an increasingly interconnected world. Such experiential learning opportunities allow

students to gain a global perspective, and develop highly-valued skills, such as intercultural communication, adaptability, and problem-solving (Bhatt et al., 2022; Di Pietro, 2019; DiFrancesco et al., 2019). Other benefits of these learning opportunities include: enriched resumes, improved academic performance, improved retention and graduation rates, increased job competitiveness, and better career skills. Despite perceived gains in international internship programs, Giorgio (2022) found only a small positive effect on post-graduation earnings.

Studies have shown that study abroad programs enroll a higher percentage of White students than Black Students. For instance, only 4% of Black/African-American students and 68% of White students participated in study abroad programs during the 2020/2021 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2014). The large disparity has been attributed to a lack of financial resources, knowledge of such opportunities, and limited study-abroad engagements in schools and programs (Bhatt et al., 2022; Institute of International Education, 2014; Murrell, 2022). In addition, despite the popularity of study abroad programs among social sciences students, awareness, and enrollment of FANH students remain low, with only about 3% of students studying agriculture participating in the 2020/2021 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2014). Therefore, efforts that seek to improve diversity and participation in international experiential learning among students in these programs should be encouraged.

Other common impediments to participating in study abroad programs include language barriers, cultural assimilation, lack of peer mentoring, and identity work (Ecker-Lyster & Kardash, 2022; Murrell, 2022). Devito (2004) asserts that students may experience cultural shock during their experiential learning trip, and this might have a positive impact when it provides the participant with a connection to their cultural heritage and initiates a pleasant adjustment to the new culture. Zhou et al. (2008) stated that a negative experience might trigger a fight or flight reaction which might harm their self-identity. The sense of belonging enjoyed in the participants' home country is lost (Brown, 2008) so there needs to be an adjustment to the new status (Alharbi and Smith, 2018). Others also experience independence from being away from home for the first time which might translate into enhanced decision-making skills (Rosenthal et al., 2008).

Based on the preceding argument, the purpose of the study is to provide underserved students with the opportunity to participate in an international experiential learning program. The specific objectives are to (1) engage FANH students in experiential learning activities utilizing near-peer mentors; (2) use hands-on in-person training in food processing and enable students to learn about the scientific and technological support state institutions provide; (3) use peer-to-peer engagement and networking events to enable students to grasp program-specific concepts, and (4) expand the cultural awareness of students.

Literature Review

Cullinan et al. (2022) assessed the impact of participating in study abroad on students' academic performance on return. The authors argued that after accounting for a wide range of educational, personal, and socioeconomic factors, there was no evidence of an independent relationship between study abroad and later academic success. However, the absence of a generalized negative association was deemed encouraging for exchange programs. Overall, they discovered some evidence of connection through diversity, particularly reflected through performance distribution and language learners. Studies show that higher (lower) performing students perform better

(worse) when they study abroad, and language students who study abroad performed much better in their language classes upon returning to their home countries, all things equal. The authors' research supported other studies that showed that participating in a study abroad program boosts language proficiency confidence. This is because students immerse themselves in a particular country's culture and learn to relate, which strengthens their language abilities.

Mitic (2020) examined the correlation between study abroad and students' positive feelings of institutional action. His study concluded that students with study abroad experience were more likely to seek out opportunities to participate in group and community activities. The National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES] (2008) reported that the overall completion of a bachelor's degree within 6 years of starting was 59% for the national cohort of college students, indicating that the study abroad was a potential strategy to increase retention and persistence rates of students [NCES] (2008).

Di Maggio (2019) examined the connection of study abroad to students' positive feelings of institutional action, retention, and persistence rates of students. The author found that students who participated in study abroad programs had more tolerance for ambiguity, higher self-confidence, appreciated cultural differences, and developed social and academic integration. The result was increased student retention, which fostered a more positive perception of institutional action.

Petrie-Wyman et al. (2020) analyzed the impact of study abroad on female business students. They adopted the definition of global competency as the internal and external skills necessary for positive and effective intercultural interactions, which include mentorship, cultural immersion, structured learning experiences, and reflection activities. They found that global competency was improved through study abroad programs and showed growth in undergraduates, even if it is short-term. They also found that studying abroad enhances a participant's capacity to communicate, be open-minded, identify their marketable abilities, and exhibit a higher openness to having an international experience and working overseas while improving interpersonal skills.

Smith (2019) examined why study abroad could be the key to career success. According to him, important lessons are gained from experiencing how people from the host country live. It indicated that studying abroad also increases tolerance and acceptance of peoples' differences. He cited research from the Institute of International Education, which found that studying abroad can significantly affect the acquisition of 21st Century skills and one's capacity to find employment. Smith asserted that longer study abroad trips significantly impact future employment offers and the development of skills, such as confidence, self-awareness, intercultural skills, and problem-solving skills.

Tarry (2011) postulated that the experience of experiential learning programs might promote cultural adoption. However, some scholars argue that the intent is not adoption but rather education and understanding of these new cultures (Forbes-Mewett and Nyland, 2008; Kingston and Forland, 2008). Data from the Institute of International Education (2022) indicated that in 2020/2021, 66% of all study abroad students traveled to Europe, and only 2% traveled to Sub-Sahara Africa. Also, the data reflected the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020/2021, there was a 91% decrease in study abroad enrollments. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, study abroad programs saw several modifications, including hybridized and flexible activities and objectives. Levine-West et al.

(2023) surveyed a group of U.S. students studying abroad in 22 different countries in the fall of 2021 and spring of 2022 about their concerns about the pandemic, study abroad pre-departure, COVID-19 restrictions in their host countries and reported that the pandemic impacted students learning, academic performance, and social interactions.

Methodology

Design or Processes

A total of sixteen (16) participants, made up of nine (9) students and five (5) faculty and two (2) staff traveled to Ghana in the summer of 2022. The process had three major components: planning, student recruitment and selection, and experiential learning. These phases are explained below in detail.

Planning

In the spring of 2022, partners of the two institutions, Delaware State University and Tuskegee University crafted a technical and logistic plan to initiate the trip. This included travel arrangements, accommodation, in-country support, and tours of host institutions, facilities and cultural sites. Developing the study abroad program included developing the program itinerary and student recruitment. The researchers contacted the selected institutions, site locations, and students. The researchers also held periodic meetings with the students.

Student Recruitment and Selection

Students majoring in food, nutrition, and agricultural science programs in the two partnering institutions were introduced to the program through a series of in-person and virtual seminars, in the spring of 2022. The students were presented with the project objectives and proposed plan of activities, and invited to complete an application, which included a brief letter of interest. The researchers reviewed each institution's applications in March of 2022 and evaluated participants' academic performance and evidence of interest. Priority was given to minorities and females from underrepresented groups and students with no previous international experiential opportunity for research or education. Students selected showed interest in exploring a global experience; a desire to participate in an ongoing research, education, and outreach training project; and enthusiasm about meeting the challenges of international study and travel programs. As indicated earlier, nine (9) students were selected; of the nine student participants, six (6) were females and three (3) were males.

The students selected attended pre-departure orientation events on health and safety, travel advisories from the State Department, medical insurance, contact information, and maps. They were also provided application support for visa processing, immunization information, and ground itinerary of daily activities. Other pre-departure programming included each student participant signing the universities' codes of conduct and liability release documents developed by the respective International Student Offices. Travel scholarships were given to the students to fund their travel expenses.

Experiential Learning

General

They visited three of Ghana's universities located in three regions: the University of Ghana (Accra, Greater Accra Region), the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (Kumasi,

Ashanti Region), and the University of Cape Coast (Cape Coast, Central Region). They also visited three food-related governmental institutions, namely, the Food and Drug Authority, the Food Research Institute, the Ghana Standards Authority, and other smaller private entities. Furthermore, they did some sightseeing and undertook pleasure trips, such as visiting Jamestown, also known as British Accra, the Independence Square, the Arts Center, outdoor Arts and Crafts markets, and the Pleasure Beach, in Accra, Ghana's capital. Partnering officials of the host institutions engaged students in productive and insightful discussions and gave them a tour of their facilities.

Specifics

The program provided opportunities for students to interact with faculty and students in Ghana and participate in hands-on activities. Other institutions that faculty and the student participants visited included the Kyebi Bread Factory in the Eastern Region, where they incorporate biofortified orange-fleshed sweet potato in bread to improve the nutritional quality of the bread; the Food and Drug Authority in the Greater Accra Region; Hedy Farms also in the Greater Accra Region, which processes mango into several value-added products; Tetteh Quarshie Cocoa Farm, in the Eastern Region (Tetteh Quarshie was the first person to introduce cocoa to Ghana); a rubber tree producing farm in the Central Region; the Food Research Institute (FRI), in the Greater Accra Region, where students were briefed about FRI's activities and mandate, and had hands-on experience with food preparation. The students also listened to presentations from vendors and value-added producers who market nutritious foods and medicinal products. Additionally, they visited the Ghana Textiles Printing, in the Greater Accra Region, the leading print and textiles company in West Africa, and they visited a local producer, where they learned about fabric production and batik.

Also, the group toured places of great historical and cultural relevance, such as the Slave River in the Central Region, comprised of two rivers, one with female energy and the other with male energy. It was a resting spot for kidnapped Africans making the 400-mile four-month walk to be sold at the Cape Coast Castle and the Central Region. The kidnappers knew they could not get top dollar for kidnapped persons if they looked weak, so they would stop at that site to feed and wash them and brand them as if they were cattle. The solemnity of the moment was not missed by the group. "The dungeons and holding cells without light were darker than midnight, with very little ventilation," Seaton (one of the student participants) recalled. "Inside was highly humid with no windows, which felt like a glimpse of suffocation." "We learned about the mimosa plant, which closes up when touched," said Sutherland (one of the student participants). According to her, "It was used by enslaved people to know whether it was safe to move about when trying to escape bondage." She indicated, "We were told by the tour guide that the floor of the (Cape Coast) dungeons is impacted with bodily waste since the (kidnapped Africans) did not have any proper place to use the bathroom."

The group also visited the Kakum Canopy Walk in the Kakum National Park, the La Pleasure Beach, and the Komfo Anokye Teaching Hospital, Ghana's second-largest Hospital. The canopy walk was designed to increase ecotourism and consists of 1,000 feet of wooden plank walkway of seven separate bridges that hang from trees by ropes over 130 feet above the ground. At the La Pleasure Beach, the group was treated with various Ghanaian foods, music, and dancing. The group was fascinated by the creativity of the musicians and dancers. The Komfo Anokye Teaching Hospital is the site of the legendary sword of Komfo Anokye, the chief fetish priest of the Ashanti

Kingdom in years past. The sword is believed to be immovable, necessitating the construction of the hospital around it.

Results

General Results

The students were highly motivated during the trip. They benefitted from the program by gaining experiences and interactions that extended beyond the classroom. Faculty interactions with students during and after the trip revealed that students learned about cultural intelligence, multiculturalism, agrotourism, and alternate food processing techniques. The practical aspects of the trip were the most impactful, as reiterated by the students. Students' feedback indicated a lifetime experience and growth.

Specific Results

At the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, faculty met with the Dean and staff of the International Programs Office (IPO) to explore partnership opportunities between the three institutions: Delaware State University, Tuskegee University and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. The faculty was provided with an overview of the organizational structures and goals of the IPO. Also, students visited selected departments where they met and interacted with other students and faculty.

The group met the staff and management of the Food and Drug Authority, where members were briefed on the regulatory framework to protect public health by ensuring the availability of safe and quality food on the Ghanaian market and beyond. At the FRI, the group engaged with staff and management and was briefed about the FRI's role in advancing Ghana's food and agricultural sectors by providing scientific and technological support to micro, small-, medium-, and large-scale food industries. The officials there described their mandate, vision, and success stories. At the Ghana Standards Authority, selected faculty toured their research facilities and interacted with staff.

The group toured an orange-fleshed potato farm and their production facility at Kyebi, the Kyebi Bread Factory, where the group was introduced to bread formulated with orange-flesh sweet potatoes. The group observed and participated in the various steps of incorporating biofortified orange-fleshed sweet potato in bread, including blanching, mashing, mixing, kneading, and bread proofing. The group interacted with the facility's management and production team, and faculty offered technical assistance/solutions to some of their processes. During a stop at the Cahaya Lounge in Accra, the group interacted with the orange-flesh potato producers and noted other value-added products such as gari, fried, and mashed potatoes. The students were impressed by the sophisticated agro-based processing industries in Ghana. Additionally, the group visited other private entities, such as the Hendy Farms and the Tetteh Quarshie Center. At the Hendy Farms, a mango producing and processing farm, the group noted the mango trees and solar drying panels, and developed value-added products such as honey, hot sauce, jam, and fresh and dried mango. At the Tetteh Quarshie Cocoa Farm and Exhibition Center, the group was provided with the history of how Tetteh Quarshie introduced cocoa to Ghana. They tasted the cocoa beans and observed the sun-drying of the cocoa beans.

As indicated earlier, one of the places that the group visited was Jamestown in Accra. Here, the students were given Ga names, which matched their birth orders and their characters (a common system used by the Gas). The Gas are one of the tribes in Ghana, and they mainly reside in the capital and its surrounding environs. Jamestown is one of the places where they reside.

Discussion

Faculty observed personal growth and development in the students. For most students, it was their first trip abroad and an introduction to cultural intelligence. The exposure improved their cultural competencies, experiential learning experiences, and appreciation of cultural diversity. The students gained intercultural competency, international exposure, and a deeper understanding of what it means to be a global citizen. They were asked to compile a portfolio that shows their understanding of their experiential learning in Ghana and participation in the engagements. The portfolio consisted of students' experiences with educational, industrial, and state institutions they visited; reflections on those experiences and their learning, as well materials from cultural activities they participated in and other aspects that they feel are relevant to their experiences in Ghana.

One of the students said, "This trip has killed all unconscious stigmas I might have had, and it has cured me in the sense of knowledge. This 2022 Experiential learning trip to Ghana has expanded my mind and my horizons and future business ideas. It made me more appreciative and prouder of agriculture. I learned that I am a descendant of Ghana, which explains why I probably didn't need a visa to return home. I was often asked if I was a local, and Ghana indeed felt like a home away from home with its tropical atmosphere, unique taste of music, and mouth-watering food. Ghana has so much potential to be one of the world's top-producing countries, especially in its agricultural sector. They have a plethora of resources and a welcoming culture with a variety of talented and hard-working people. Lastly, I would like to thank all the organizers for arranging such an interactive and successful trip, allowing students to have access to such a valuable experience."

Another student shared, "Before going on this trip, I had some preconceived notions about Africa and knew absolutely nothing about Ghana. I picked up the book "Dark Days in Ghana" written by Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, which helped me to understand what Ghanaian people might be like and how the American government played a vital role in the coup against him. One of the main thoughts I had about Africa is that girls did not go to school and there was little opportunity for them to advance in the workplace. Most of the trip, when it was time for kids to go to school, I would see little girls in uniform on buses or walking home in the afternoon, and it brought me such delight. Another book that I began reading while in Ghana was 'Women's Liberation and the African freedom struggle' by Thomas Sankara. This book helps to put into context that while, yes, young women now have more access to education, jobs, and safety the work is not done yet."

When touring the different facilities over the almost two-week period, many of the department heads were women, which was somewhat surprising to see. In America, you do not often see a Black woman in charge in corporate settings, but I suppose in a country that is majority Black people it would be kind of hard to not have a Black woman in the role of a "higher up." Women that were faculty members from Tuskegee University, as well as Dr. Aryee from Delaware State University were women who went on to get their doctorate degrees and become teachers, which

was inspiring to see the full circle. They all once were little girls in uniform riding buses to get to school. While this is not what was expected for us to learn, it is something that I take away from the trip; that a woman can be anything they want. I think I already learned certain lessons at an early age having parents from the Caribbean and going back to the islands often in my youth. I know how to be grateful for the material possessions I own and the house that I grew up in because my family members had less than me. I have a newfound respect for mothers as most street merchants were working mothers that would be up before the sun rose to sunset. I do not believe that is their dream to work all day like that, but hopefully, their daughters will be able to make a better life for themselves and future generations.”

Students experienced enhanced curriculum, language immersion, global perspective, culinary expansion, independence, creativity, and openness to accepting different cultures and trying new things. They also expressed improved communication skills by attentively listening and making sense of situations. The researchers believe that travel abroad and experiential learning help students connect with real-life issues. Students can connect what they learn in the classroom to real-life challenges and bring their textbooks to life. Students expressed an appreciation for the ability to connect the dots through experiencing different aspects of life.

Conclusion

The study provided underserved students with the opportunity to participate in an international experiential learning program. The specific objectives were to engage FANH students in experiential learning activities utilizing near-peer mentors; use hands-on in-person training in food processing and enable students to learn about the scientific and technological support state institutions provide; use peer-to-peer engagement and networking events to allow students to grasp program-specific concepts; and expand the cultural awareness of students.

Overall, the international experience was a valuable tool in enhancing students’ cultural awareness. Delaware State University and Tuskegee University, seek to increase minority participation in the FANH program and ensure student diversity and global competitiveness. The students’ perceptions of Ghanaian culture were positive, and the experience dispelled a lot of their misconceptions about Ghanaians. The trip expanded students’ perception of agricultural sciences. The tropical twist, hi-life music, and spicy authentic local foods were among the highlights for most of the students. Even though only three regions were visited, the students appreciated the rich and diverse cuisine. With the significant ease of pandemic-related restrictions students’ learning and social interactions were not impacted. The main challenges were the language barrier, ability to communicate with the hawkers, and lengthy bus rides between regions.

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