

## **Beliefs, Barriers, and Benefits of a Faculty Abroad Experience in Mexico**

**Kim E. Dooley**, Professor

Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, & Communications

Texas A&M University

107E Scoates Hall

College Station, TX 77843-2116

(979) 862-7180 phone

(979) 845-6296 fax

[k-dooley@tamu.edu](mailto:k-dooley@tamu.edu)

**Larry M. Dooley**, Associate Professor

Department of Educational Administration and Human Resource Development

Texas A&M University

**Gabriel Carranza**, Director

Office of Mexican and Latin American Programs

Texas A&M University

### **Abstract**

*Prior research has emphasized the need for international agricultural experiences for students. However, university faculty members have the ability to greatly impact students in their preparation to be global citizens if they have participated in international experiences. Qualitative content analyses of pre-reflective and post-reflective questions were used in this study to determine beliefs, barriers, and benefits to participation in a faculty abroad seminar held in Mexico. The analyses of perceived change indicated that (a) contacts and interest in collaboration with Mexican institutions was not as difficult as originally thought, (b) personal relationships were critical for international collaboration, (c) Mexico's political climate was complex, and (d) all participants had a greater appreciation of the diversity of Mexican culture after participation. Data pattern analyses revealed that (a) Hispanics gained a greater appreciation of their own history and culture, (b) non-Hispanics felt that language was a barrier, and (c) traveling was more difficult for those with families/young children. Lack of funding for travel was a major barrier for the sustainability of long-term bi-national projects. Workload and time constraints were more common among Assistant Professors who had the added pressures of tenure and promotion. This seminar contributed to the internationalization of faculty by directly exposing them to the culture, history, government, business, and language of Mexico. Future studies to compare these results with other faculty abroad programs should be conducted.*

**Key words:** Faculty Abroad, Beliefs, Barriers, Benefits

### Introduction

In a recent study conducted by Edgar, Edgar, Briers, and Lawver (2006), the importance of a global perspective for university students was deemed necessary to prepare society-ready graduates. Zhai and Scheer (2004) indicated that there was a need for university programs to address global issues in colleges of agriculture. Study abroad was recommended to enhance cultural immersion for students. Other researchers have also emphasized the need for international agricultural experiences for students (Edgar, Edgar, Briers, & Lawver, 2006; Irani, Place, Lundy, & Friedel, 2004; Wingenbach, Boyd, Lindner, et al., 2003).

Agricultural and Extension educators are increasingly aware of the implications and importance of a global perspective (Harbstreet & Welton, 1992). The Committee for Globalizing Agricultural, Science, and Education Programs for America states the importance of “globally competent stakeholders, faculty and students in the U.S. food, agriculture, and natural resource sectors who live, compete, and work well in an ever dynamic and interdependent world community” (CSREES, USDA, 2004, ¶6). However, most research has focused on providing international opportunities for students. What about university faculty? How can faculty promote and encourage internationalization if they themselves have not been exposed?

### Review of Literature

In order to operationalize the major themes of this research, a conceptual framework on beliefs, barriers, and benefits to faculty abroad experiences was examined. In a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Hall (2007) posits that most universities recognize the importance of international experience. In fact, the U.S. House of Representatives has proposed the creation of a foundation whose goals would be to send 1 million students abroad every year over the next 10 years. Hall argues that as important as this may be, faculty members need this experience as well.

Just as students abroad benefit most from a total immersion in cultural difference and the unpredictable, so too do faculty members stand to gain more from teaching at a different institution, with different students, in circumstances outside their academic comfort zone. (p. B20)

He goes on to include the additional benefits of broadening perspectives and speaking from experience in the classroom about cultural assumptions.

Özturgut (2007) reviewed the benefits of study abroad programs. These benefits include enhancing students’ worldview, increasing self-reliance and confidence, and providing higher levels of openness and flexibility. The author supports the argument that “participation in study abroad programs enhances academic, social and cultural skills of students, makes them aware of transnational issues, and makes them better leaders of tomorrow” (p. 44). This being the case, then can it be assumed that higher education faculty would reap the same benefits? “If we want more students to participate in study abroad programs, first we need to educate our faculty” (p. 44).

Benefits of abroad experiences impact an individual’s beliefs and values. Beliefs can be defined as “judgments of the credibility of conceptualization” (McLeod, 1991, p. 7). Dweck’s attribution theory includes individual beliefs about his/her own competence (1989). A belief about international competence is impacted both by affect and cognition. Participation in a study

abroad program promotes international competence and internalizes cultural concepts and attitudes.

A baseline study conducted by the University of Minnesota surveyed 224 faculty, advisors, department directors and department heads about their beliefs about study abroad (Tomsic, n.d.). Most faculty believe that study abroad is desirable or essential, that it is important to work with people from different cultural backgrounds, it helps people to function effectively in another culture within their profession, and enhances knowledge of current international issues and affairs. If faculty believe these competencies can be gained through a study abroad, would it not be true that faculty should also have (are be given the opportunity to gain) these competencies? Through study, teaching, or research abroad, faculty members can gain the cognitive and affective competence to transfer to students.

Not all students or faculty can (or will) participate in abroad programs. In *Missing the Boat: The Failure to Internationalize American Higher Education* (1991), Goodwin and Nacht surveyed U.S. faculty about participation in international programs. The primary barriers found were declining funding, policies in regard to promotion and tenure, two career households, and American academic arrogance. Fulbright and international fellowships have declined, shrinking funding sources for international exchanges. Many U.S. institutions do not recognize or reward international work in promotion and tenure decisions at the assistant professor rank. Faculty members with young children are limited in their ability to study, teach or research abroad. Some faculty members believe that U.S. higher education is superior and even question the value of international programs. Without a desire or belief that international experiences (a) are valuable to career enhancement, (b) will not interfere with family, and (c) will not be a financial burden, participation is unlikely to occur.

### **Background on the Study Context**

The Faculty Abroad Seminar, sponsored through the Office of Mexican and Latin American Programs at Texas A&M University, was developed to contribute to the internationalization of faculty by directly exposing them to the culture, history, government, business, and language of Mexico. The main objective of the seminar is for the faculty participants to bring relevant global perspectives back into the classroom. The program was designed to establish linkages with colleagues at Mexican Universities and related organizations, including designing collaborative research with Mexican counterparts. Faculty members apply to participate in a 10-day networking and culturally-rich experience. Over the last 13 years, more than 140 faculty members have participated in this program.

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to determine (a) perceived changes in attitudes/beliefs, (b) expected gains, (c) actual benefits/opportunities, and (d) barriers of participation in the Faculty Abroad Seminar.

## Methods

The researchers used a purposive sample consisting of faculty who participated (N=9) in the Faculty Abroad Seminar in May 2007. Data were collected using a modified version of pre-reflective and post-reflective instruments (Edgar, Edgar, Lawver, & Briers, 2006; Elliot & Yanik, 2002; Radhakrishna & Dominguez, 1999).

Preflection is a process of being consciously aware of the expectations associated with the learning experience...it increases the readiness capacity for learning from the experiences, thereby increasing the capacity to reflect upon the concrete experience and increase the overall learning. Preflection provides a bridge between thinking about an experience and actually learning from the experience. (Jones & Bjelland, 2004, p. 963)

Guiding questions on the *preflection* instrument asked about initial attitudes or beliefs about visiting Mexico and expected gains from participating in the program. The *reflection* instrument asked about post-experience attitudes or beliefs, barriers, and opportunities for participating in long-term international activities.

Respondents were coded by gender, (M or F), national origin (Hispanic = H; Non-Hispanic = NH) and a random number to ensure confidentiality. Some representative quotes in the findings section may also include professorial rank or title when data interpretation was impacted by these factors.

An open-coding content analysis was used to determine emerging themes and patterns based upon hand-written reflections by the participant (archival data). Data themes and categories were peer reviewed by the program coordinator and a 2007 participant of the program. The primary evaluator was also a past participant of the program and thus was familiar with the context. An audit trail of all responses by emerging categories is included in the results.

## Results

In order to recognize patterns of change, the results will be discussed by *preflection* and *reflection* themes, followed by noted changes as result of participation in the program. Representative quotes are included to provide vicarious description.

### *Preflection Categories*

The first pre-reflective question was about *attitudes and beliefs prior to the trip*. There were seven categories that emerged. Respondents believed that Mexico has a complex political structure with a conservative, patriarchal society (MH1, FH4, FNH6, MNH7, MNH8, FNH9). Comments like "I believe that it is a far more patriarchal society" (MNH8), "Mexico seems to be a 'divided' country with many political divisions as seen by the last election" (FH4) and "Mexico is a complicated country...too much partisanship complicates politics" (MH1) demonstrate this concept. A belief that collaboration is difficult (but can happen as a result of this trip) was expressed (MH1, FH5). "Scientific collaborations are difficult to establish...to establish collaborations entails huge commitments" (MH1). Related to this category was the impression that there was enormous potential and resources available for collaboration (MH1, MNH2, FH3, FH4, MNH7). "Mexico is a poor country with tremendous potential" (MH1) and "I believe Mexico is an untapped area" (MNH2) represent this view. Another respondent

integrated the belief that they would establish collaborative relationships and ultimately benefit their students:

*I believe that during my visit I will establish many good relationships with colleagues here from Texas A&M and with colleagues from Mexican universities. I also expect to learn a lot about the Mexican culture and the people from Mexico. It will be helpful for me to get closer to the Mexican people. It will help me with my interaction with my students and also for my work in the rural communities of Texas (FH5).*

The participants in 2007 had diverse national origins (Mexico, Dominican Republic, Peru, Brazil, Philippines) with more than half fluent in Spanish. One was married to someone from Mexico. One participant expressed concern about the language barrier (MNH2). Others indicated some fear of security issues and social problems due to economic stratification (MH1, FNH6, MNH8, MNH2, FH4, FH5, MNH7, FNH9). “Mexico is having huge security problems” (MH1) expressed this view. Further integration of the categories can be found: “My perception of Mexico City is that it is a dangerous place, especially for foreigners. I have some trepidation that they view us as arrogant & career driven” (MNH8).

Overall participants believed that the Mexican people were friendly with a rich and diverse cultural heritage (MH1, MNH2, FH3, FH4, FH5, FNH6, MNH7, MNH8, FNH9). Specifically music, art, language, food, dance, custom, pre-Hispanic, and Hispanic culture were mentioned. “I think the language is beautiful as well as the customs” (FH3) and “I think the people are warm and friendly” (FH5) represent this category.

The last two categories support a barrier expressed by Goodwin and Nacht (1991) of American academic arrogance. One participant believed that Mexico devalues education (MNH8): “I believe Mexican’s in general do not value education as much as we do, particularly in science...I believe higher education is inexpensive but not accessible to the poor.” Others believed that the close proximity to the U.S. influences Mexican culture (FH5, MNH7). “The Mexican culture is rich, but I think there may be a lot of influence of the American culture in Mexico” (FH5) and “Very close ties to US..US remittances are very significant” (MNH7) represent this view.

The second prelection question addressed *expected gains from participation* in the program. There were five categories that emerged. Collaboration and contacts with Mexican colleagues was prevalent (MH1, MNH2, FH3, FH4, FNH6, MNH7, MNH8, FNH9). Some American arrogance (Goodwin & Nacht, 1991) was evident within this category with statements like “contribute to Mexico’s scientific development” (MH1) and “how higher education can be more accessible and raised in perception of Mexico” (MNH8). This category was closely related to the potential to learn more about and contribute to academic practices (MH1, MNH2, FH4, MNH8, FNH9). “A better understanding of business practices and training models...Most important, I hope to make lifetime contacts that will enable me to establish and maintain research/training and relational contacts” (MNH2) and “There is interest in my college to teach classes related to Latin America Planning & Development and I would like to explore data sources or possible teaching cooperation” (FH4) represent this perceived gain.

Learning about the Mexican culture and university systems were expected gains (MNH2, FH3, FH4, FH5, FNH6, MNH8, FNH9). To “learn more about the people and the country and understand better the academic environment in Mexico with possible research opportunities...to learn key institutions and people there to advance my teaching & research” (FH4) represented

this view. Another participant noted she hoped to gain “research contacts...better proficiency in Spanish” and “publications/grants with faculty in Mexico” (FNH6). An integration of gains can be found in this quote:

*Most importantly, a better understanding of Mexican culture—people, music, art, etc...Meeting faculty interested in global discussion, research, teaching of the Americas. Begin possible connections for student exchange or study abroad program, team-teaching opportunities, curriculum development...By the conversations I have and receptiveness of others...developing a curriculum @ A&M that does not blindly celebrate the U.S., but rather thinks more critically about its historical place, cultural conception, and ethical/political responsibilities in Mexico and Latin America. (FNH9)*

Faculty participants mentioned that by understanding the Mexican culture and higher education institutions, they were better equipped to attract students to programs at TAMU (MH1, FH3, FNH9). Measurement of gains from participation included: “whether I can attract students to my program” (MH1) and “by the number of contacts, visits, presentations, etc. as well as meeting students who might be interested in studying at TAMU” (FH3) were indicative.

An important component of the Faculty Abroad Seminar (FAS) was building collegiality across the university. Building meaningful and lasting relationships with the other faculty participants was an expected gain (MH1, MNH2, FH3). Hoping to “develop ties within the FAS faculty” (MH1) and “continue to network with my colleagues from FAS into the future” (MNH2) expressed this concept. One participant encompassed all categories with her list: “1. knowledge of Mexican culture; 2. knowledge of political system; 3. knowledge of the university system; 4. contacts for future travel/visits w/ students; 5. to get familiar w/ other faculty members; and 6. learn of the Higher Ed. system” (FH3).

#### *Post-Experience Reflection Categories*

Many of the same categories emerged in the reflection exercise about *attitudes and beliefs after the trip*. These can be compiled into five areas. Mexican politics pose a barrier to improvements was a belief (MH1, MNH2, FH5, FNH6, MNH7, MNH8, FNH9) that supported the reflection about the complexity of the political structure. A respondent who is from Mexico stated “I believe that the political turmoil that we witnessed during this trip (protests, demonstrations) could have a negative impact on my colleagues’ perception about Mexico’s stability...I feel that Mexico City constitutes a very accurate example of Mexico’s wage disparity” (MH1). Another participant reiterated:

*We’ve learned about ...the need for more capital to create more jobs for its youth populations, about the PRI’s past power and the political changes Mexico is experiencing, and about a population that has lots of requests to the government. (FH5)*

Related to this category was a belief that discrimination among Mexicans (with a definite class system) was visibly present during the visit (FNH6, MNH7). “Economic division is based upon racial/ethnic lines” (FHN6) and “definite classes (income)” (MNH7) supported this finding.

In the reflection, participants mentioned a belief that collaboration with Mexican institutions and colleagues would be difficult (yet possible) and that they expected the educational system to be of lesser quality. After the trip, faculty members believed that

Mexico's education system was of high quality with excellent opportunities for collaboration (MH1, FH3, FH5, FNH9). "I believe that Mexico's education system is remarkably good and there is lots of potential for academic dialogue" (MH1). "My post-experience changed in terms of my beliefs in the educational system; for instance, I thought schools were not going to be as good as America, but I was nicely surprised by the modernity of the institutions we visited" (FH3). One respondent was "impressed with the quality of their work" yet believed "that some of the places I visited lacked resources" (FH5).

In the pre-reflection, faculty believed that the Mexican people were friendly with a rich and diverse cultural heritage. This category was strengthened by the program. All participants mentioned that Mexico was an incredible country with a diverse history and culture. Visits to museums, art galleries, the embassy, and higher education institutions exposed faculty to history and culture. The society is based upon relationships as noted in the quote:

*I have discovered no one can really understand Mexico and Mexicans without understanding Mexico history and culture. This is such as passionate culture built on relationships and to miss this is to misunderstand Mexico...The Mexican people are very interested in relationships. I could not make a 'cold call' and expect the Mexicans to jump on board immediately. (MNH2)*

Another participant expressed how a visit to the National Palace and the art of Diego Rivera made a lasting impression.

*When we visited the 'Palacio Nacional' and saw Diego Rivera's mural on the stairs of the Palacio, I could see how the Mexican culture evolved, from its indigenous cultures to the Spanish invasion and later social revolution. Our trip reinforced all the aspects of the Mexican culture. (FH5)*

Part of the belief that Mexico is an incredible country came from interactions with the Mexican people. Their impression was that the people were friendly, hard working, and honest (FH4, FH5, MNH7). "I found hard working people willing to help foreigners in different ways...I also found very honest people who had been fair to me" (FH4). Another mentioned "hospitable people" (MNH7) as an attitude or belief.

There was no mention of security issues and the U.S. influencing culture in the post-reflection exercise. One participant felt that Mexico was "safer than I originally thought" (MNH7) and another mentioned "myths regarding safety in Mexico" (FH3) as a barrier. Language as a barrier was also mentioned, but will be included in the next section.

The next post-reflection question asked about internal or external *barriers* to participation in long-term international activities. Six categories emerged. These were closely aligned with the work of Goodwin and Nacht (1991). Indication of professional rank or title is included in the representative quotes when relevant. Lack of funding to support travel (MH1, MNH2, HF3, HF5, MNH7, MNH8, FNH9) was the barrier most frequently mentioned. "Lack of funding to support travel and other components of international academic communication" (MH1) and "There is a lack of grants/contracts for international work in my area" (MNH2) were indicative.

University and departmental policies with regard to international collaboration (MH1, MNH2, HF3, FNH6, MNH8) was another barrier to participation in long term international projects. Tenure and promotion at research institutions focuses on refereed publication and

research dollars (primarily with a national focus). One participant emphasized that you have to have an established research record for international collaboration, yet the greatest benefit professionally toward tenure and promotion is at the Assistant Professor rank.

*Academics at public universities in Mexico are hampered by bureaucracy. Also academic researchers are closed to interdisciplinary/outside collaboration because of the “publish or perish” system. They are willing to work with you only once you are established (when the benefit is decreased).* (MNH8, Assistant Professor).

Sometimes it is not just a lack of funding or policies that poses a barrier. It can also be a lack of mutual interest (FNH6, MNH8, FNH9). “Interest relative to other projects (effort vs. value)” (MNH8) and “lack of mutual interest by universities” (FNH9) were common expressions.

Time constraints due to a heavy workload and difficulty in scheduling this type of work with other responsibilities were barriers to participation (FH4, FH5, MNH7, MNH8). One respondent stated: “The only barriers could be time-constraints I face as I am already involved in several projects; AND I teach 2 courses each semester & master’s and Ph.D. committees...P&T committees emphasize publications” (FH4, Assistant Professor). Time constraints are intensified when faculty have young children/families (HF3, HF5, MNH7). “I think that having small children might contribute as a barrier to prevent participation as it requires a lot of traveling and I don’t think I will be able to travel that much” (FH3). “The main barrier for me is that it’s too difficult for me to stay far from my children and husband for so many days” (FH5).

As mentioned previously, most of the participants spoke Spanish prior to the seminar. Those who did not speak Spanish felt they were missing out on the nuances of the culture and additional collaboration with Mexican colleagues. The language barrier (MNH2, FNH6, FNH9) was mentioned by only one participant in the pre-reflection, but was emphasized by others after the experience. The duality of language and culture caused one participant to want to learn Spanish. “I realize more than ever the necessity of every US citizen to become fluent in Spanish” (FNH9). Another stated: “Only four did not speak Spanish. Therefore there were many conversations between the group and questions to tour guides where the non-Spanish speakers were left out...I wish I understood Spanish; this is a real barrier for me” (MNH2).

The last question in the post-reflection exercise related to opportunities available for long-term international experiences. Two emergent categories were prevalent. The first related to the ability to apply for funding from the National Science Foundation equivalent in Mexico (CONACyt). It should be noted that these programs are specific to STEM careers (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). Both of the participants citing these opportunities were Assistant Professors in the STEM disciplines (MH1, MNH8). The other participants felt that there were other opportunities available for collaborative projects in research and teaching (MNH2, FH4, FH5, FNH6, MNH7, MNH8, FNH9). Some of the opportunities included fellowships/grants, sabbaticals, and exchange programs (MNH7, FNH9). One participant also reiterated an expected gain from the pre-reflection: recruiting graduate students from Mexican universities (MNH8). Developing certificate programs or online graduate degrees could serve adult workers throughout Mexico (MNH2). Some had already been invited to return to give presentations or workshops and to plan an interdisciplinary conference (MNH8, FNH9).

### *Analysis of Perceived Change (Preflection and Reflection)*

The primary objective of this research was to determine change as a result of participation in the Faculty Abroad Program. A summary of findings indicates the participants believed:

- Contacts and interest in collaboration with Mexican institutions was not as difficult as originally thought  
*By talking with my Mexican colleagues, I realized that they were as interested as I was in bridging the cultural/political/scientific gap that separates Mexico & the U.S. (MH1).*
- Personal relationships were critical  
*I was surprised at the importance of personal relationships in Mexico. In the U.S., I can write a paper w/ co authors I have never met. In Mexico, this is unthinkable (MNH8).*
- Mexico's political climate was complex  
*I think now I respect more the Mexican people and its culture...I now better understand the immigration problem, both from the US perspective and Mexican perspective...I also now feel more comfortable to engage in common projects with Mexican researchers and organizations (FH5).*
- They gained a greater appreciation of the diversity of Mexican culture.  
*I have been to many countries with distinct cultures but this experience has provided me a much deeper understanding of a country's culture, traditions, and its people (MNH7).*

### **Conclusions**

Faculty participants were asked to reflect on their attitudes and beliefs before and after the seminar. There was an initial belief that the educational system in Mexico would be inferior and not as competitive as the U.S. However, participants found the universities to be better equipped and receptive to collaboration and interchange. The initial "American academic arrogance" was noted in the work of Goodwin and Nacht (1991). Participants believed collaboration with Mexican institutions was not as difficult as originally thought. This could be related to the benefit of increasing levels of openness and flexibility as a result of participation in an abroad program (Özturgut, 2007). Özturgut found an awareness of transnational issues was a result of participation. This was supported by the Faculty Abroad Seminar participants in their belief that Mexico was more modern and safer than expected. The Faculty considered the political system to be complex but also believed it was a country of enormous potential and resources after participation in the program.

An important change after participation in the program was the belief that personal relationships were critical for collaboration. Museums and historical sites gave insight into the rich cultural heritage of Mexico. Based upon Hall (2007) faculty can broaden perspectives and speak from experience when they return to the classroom. Several faculty members mentioned their plans to bring this experience back to their students. Enhancement of academic, social and cultural skills (Özturgut, 2007) and gains in international competence by enhancing knowledge of current international issues and affairs (Tomsic, n.d.; Dweck, 1989) were faculty benefits to participation.

An analysis of data patterns revealed that Hispanics gained a greater appreciation of their own history and culture (MH1, MH3, FH5). Non-Hispanics felt that language was a barrier to communication (MNH2, FNH6, FNH9). Traveling was more difficult for those with families/young children (FH3, FH5, MNH7) and a lack of funding for travel was a major barrier for the sustainability of bi-national projects as supported by Goodwin and Nacht (1991). Workload and time constraints were more common among Assistant Professors (FH4, FH5, MNH7, MNH8) who had the added pressures of tenure and promotion.

### **Educational Importance and Implications**

This seminar contributed to the internationalization of faculty by directly exposing them to the culture, history, government, business, and language of Mexico. The impact of a faculty abroad program has implications for incorporating global perspectives for teaching and research endeavors. Some of these implications and recommendations could greatly impact the sustainability of faculty abroad programs.

The research conclusions and the *Essay in Education* article by Özturgut (2007) support these recommendations. First, recognition of international collaboration for research projects should be supported in tenure and promotion decisions. Assistant professors who wait to participate in international projects may limit their research to domestic issues. Many of the problems facing our world today need interdisciplinary and multi-national solutions. Second, higher education institutions (and funding sources such as Fulbright) should encourage faculty sabbaticals abroad. Programs that support dual-income families (child care options, schooling, partner-placement) should be expanded. Third, as stated by Hall in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* piece, institutions should develop new programs dedicated to faculty abroad. This will take “financial creativity to ensure the modestly paid professors are not economically overburdened by the experience” (2007, B20).

This study was limited to the participants in the 2007 seminar. Further expansion of this research should include a review of the program impacts in teaching and research for all participants (1994-present). This information could serve as a broader evaluation of this program at Texas A&M University. A comparison study of other faculty abroad programs could provide substantiation of the findings and conclusions of this study.

In sum, we conclude with the inclusion of a quote by one of the 2007 Faculty Abroad participants on the program promotional materials:

*This opportunity has contributed to my growth as an academic within this institution. I hope that Texas A&M continues to support this program in the future since it is perhaps one of the best examples of the commitment of this university towards a greater internationalization of its faculty and, ultimately, its students.*

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