

Value of International Agricultural Exchange Programs: A Brazilian Follow-Up Study

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Abstract

International agricultural education programs play an important role in providing practical agricultural training to young adults from around the world. These programs have a 50 year plus success story of meeting the objectives of the Fulbright – Hays Act of 1961 to “...increase mutual understanding between people of the U.S. and people of other countries by means of educational and cultural exchange... (U.S. Code, 1961). However, there is a current threat to the continuation of these programs due to concerns over saving U.S. jobs and threats to homeland security. It is the purpose of this paper to determine the value of agricultural educational exchange programs by surveying program alumni of the Communicating for Agriculture Exchange Program. The population being surveyed is from the Federal Agricultural University of Vicosa, in Vicosa, Brazil. An analysis of the results of the survey shows that program participants gained valuable cross cultural experiences, better understanding of U.S. culture, and personal development. These values do meet the intent of the Fulbright-hays Act of 1961. The survey results need to be shared with the U.S. State Department to provide research evidence of the exchange programs value.

Key words: International, Agricultural, Exchange Programs,

Introduction

“...educational exchange is essential to reducing international suspicion, encouraging mutual understanding, and advancing international cooperation” (National Humanities Center, 1997).

International agricultural education exchange programs play an important role in providing practical agricultural training to young adults from around the world (Herrin, 1991; Jones, 1993; Jones, 2000). Several U.S. based exchange organizations (Communicating for Agriculture Exchange Program (CAEP), Global Outreach, MAST International, Ohio State Agricultural Internship program, Worldwide Farmers, etc.) provide practical agricultural education programs to more than 2,000 young men and women from more than 45 countries each year. These programs follow an experiential based philosophical approach (Kolb, 1984). A typical program includes four to twelve months of practical training which follows a formal training plan. The sponsoring organization develops a network of country partners from around the world who help with the recruitment and selection of applicants. These country partners are usually based at colleges of agriculture or with agricultural organizations within the country. The selected applications are sent to the sponsoring organization in the U.S. for placement. The sponsoring organization develops a network of host placements (farms, ranches, horticultural businesses, agricultural businesses, etc.) who are interested in working with an international trainee. The sponsoring organization matches the interests and experiences of the applicant with a host placement who can provide the experiences desired by the trainee. The sponsoring organization is required to complete a training plan (identify goals and objectives, skills to be imparted, a syllabus and chronology of activities, justification for on-the-job training, and a plan for monitoring and evaluating the experience) for each host placement. Participants gain new technical skills as well as a cross cultural experience through their program participation.

The international agricultural education exchange programs were authorized by the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961 as amended by the Fulbright Hayes Act of 1961 to “... increase mutual understanding between people of the U.S. and the people of other countries by means of educational and cultural exchange ...” (U.S. Code, 1961). The exchange programs have generally “... been highly successful in meeting the goals of the Fulbright – Hays Act...” (Department of State, 2007, p. 3). There are many anecdotal examples of the value of the program experience. However, a search of the literature reveals few formal studies showing the exchange program value. Unfortunately, these international agricultural exchange programs are now under significant threat from increased visa controls. In fact, recent Department of State and GAO studies reveal misuse of the exchange programs (Department of State, 2007). For example, there are claims of the exchange program participants taking jobs from Americans and that the participants are a threat to homeland security. There is an urgent need for research studies to provide evidence of the value of these programs.

Purpose and Objectives

What is the value of international agricultural education exchange programs? Reliable data do not exist to provide an accurate response to concerns and questions raised by the Department of State. It is the purpose of this study to determine the value of international agricultural exchange programs. The objective is to complete a pilot study of Communicating for Agriculture Exchange Program (CAEP) alumni from the Federal Agricultural University of Vicosa (UFV) in Brazil. UFV is considered one of the top agricultural universities in Brazil. UFV was modeled under the U.S. land grant system and received initial support and guidance

from Purdue University. A need was identified at UFV to provide international experience opportunities to undergraduate agricultural students. There were international opportunities available to graduate students but very few opportunities to undergraduate students.

The specific objectives of this study will provide answers to the following questions:

- What was the value of your experience in advancing your career?
- What was the value of the program in helping you to better understand the cross cultural aspects of life in the United States
- Did you learn new techniques and skills?

Methodology

A population of 109 CAEP international agricultural exchange program alumni from the Federal Agricultural University of Vicosa (UFV) was surveyed. Each of these people has recently completed their international agricultural program experience (from 2003 – 2006). All members were included in the sample. A questionnaire was developed specifically for use in this study. Five point Likert-type scales were developed to measure the level of agreement with the questionnaire items. A rating of 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree or Disagree; 4 = Agree; and 5 = Strongly Agree was used. Items included in the questionnaire were directly linked to the value of international agricultural exchange programs. The instrument was field tested in July of 2007. The questionnaire and cover letter were sent by e-mail to each member of the population on August 27, 2007. A follow-up letter was sent by e-mail to the non-respondents on September 10, 2007. Forty-four people responded to the questionnaire for a 40 % response rate. A random sample of non-respondents was completed to test differences in how respondents and non-respondents answered instrument items. There was no difference.

Results

Table 1 shows the rank order of the responses by instrument item.

Table 1

Rank Order of Values Gained by Participation in Communicating for Agriculture Exchange Program, Federal Agricultural University of Vicosa, Brazil (2003-2006)

Value	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	Rank
I achieved personal development due to the program.	44	4.77	1
I matured as an individual due to the program.	44	4.68	2
I improved my English speaking ability.	44	4.64	3
The U.S. training experience helped my personal development (maturity, ideas, wider horizon).	43	4.56	4
I learned a lot about myself during the program.	44	4.55	5
My experience helped me to understand American culture.	44	4.52	6
The program has had a positive impact on my career.	44	4.43	7
I have used my experience to interpret American culture back home.	44	4.41	8
I obtained professional and career growth due to the program.	43	4.34	9
My experience in the program has helped me to interpret my own society.	44	4.20	10

The value of my experience has increased since I returned home.	42	4.17	11
I am able to apply what I learned in the program.	44	4.11	12
My technological skill level increased due to the program.	44	4.07	13
Completing the program helped me to establish my career objectives.	43	4.05	14
The program enabled me to gain the skills needed in order to be competitive in my field.	44	4.02	15
My motivation and interest toward my career increased because of my program participation.	43	3.93	16
I learned new technology.	44	3.89	17
Program completion has helped me do my current job.	44	3.75	18
I was able to teach technology skills to my host.	44	3.09	19

Item 20 on the questionnaire asked people to provide comments about their program experience. Several responses are listed below:

The program was the best thing that did happen in my life cause (sp) helped me a lot to get my actual job down here in Brazil. Helped me to learn English, and teach me a lot about agriculture. One of the most important thing was the friends and the family that I build there. I still am in touch with my American family and friends and I miss them a lot and I am sure that they miss me too. I would straightly recommend students recently graduated to apply on this program.

This is a greatest experience that a person can have. I mean personal and professional experience. I think that even when something goes wrong you can learn something. So, all that you do will give you knowledge and maturity. I wish that everybody goes on an international exchange program like CAEP.

The program helped me a lot in my life because I learned about enology, people, and myself, USA and I could know places that I didn't expect to know if I didn't participate in this program. I recommend this program for everybody because I can't measure the improve (sp) of this program made in my life.

Participating in CAEP's program has helped me a lot to achieve my personal goals mainly because of the English. I can't say that I've used the practical experience at all since I left the U.S., although going through all the differences in culture has helped me to perform better on my job. I am now a trainee at British American tobacco and it requires me to deal with people from all over the world, and being able to understand and respect the differences among us all and the diversity is something I bring from the time I went abroad through CAEP.

An analysis of the results indicates that the personal development, ability to improve English language skills, having a cross cultural experience, and understanding American culture were of high value to the respondents. The respondents placed the highest value (4.77) on the personal development achieved during their program. The second highest value according to the respondents was on their personal maturity (4.68). A better understanding of American culture also ranked high (4.52). The respondents did also indicate a high value placed on the positive

impact the experience had to their career development (4.43). The results do show that the exchange program participants did achieve the intent of the Fulbright vision of showing that "...educational exchange is essential in encouraging mutual understanding and advancing international cooperation" (National Humanities Center, 1997). An analysis of the results indicates less value being placed on learning new technology (3.89). One factor in this result may be that the level of technology is not so different between the United States and Brazil. Another factor may be that the climate differences between Brazil and the United States do not allow for the exchange of appropriate technologies in the horticultural industry.

Educational Implications

The continuation of international agricultural exchange programs is under serious threat from increased visa controls and regulations from the U.S. State Department. The results of this study need to be shared with officials of the U.S. State Department to show the value of international agricultural education exchange programs. The results of this study will be used as a beginning point to survey larger numbers of program alumni. For example, do participants from other countries share the values of the Brazilian participants? In addition, research efforts need to be conducted to show the value of international agricultural exchange programs to hosting organizations and to the larger U.S. communities where the training takes place. Do the hosting businesses and the surrounding communities gain and value cultural understanding from the exchange program participants? Is the labor provided by the exchange program participants more valuable than the cultural understanding or technology exchange? Is there a threat to homeland security by these exchange program participants? Another research study needs to focus on the value gained from exchange program experiences by Americans who go abroad for their international experiences. Many of the U.S. State Department authorized programs require a reciprocity condition that American students also do similar programs abroad. Do American students place equal value of the factors surveyed in this study? The results of these studies need to be analyzed and used by international agricultural exchange programs to consistently improve program operations and to show why these programs need to be supported and continued to fulfill the vision of the Fulbright Hayes Act.

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