The Development and Implementation of an International Extension Training Program for County Extension Faculty

Pete Vergot III
Associate Professor, District Extension Director
University of Florida/IFAS Extension
155 Research Road
Quincy, FL 32351 USA
Telephone: (850) 875-7137
Fax: (850) 875-7189
E-mail: vergot@ifas.ufl.edu

Abstract

University of Florida /IFAS Extension was proud to begin a new international extension professional development program for county faculty. The program goals were to provide an introduction, awareness, and first hand experiences to the many opportunities awaiting county extension faculty in international extension work. County faculty many times are discouraged by their clientele with concerns that they, “county agents,” would be “giving away” information and practices seen as advantages to production and marketing of crops, livestock, fruits, vegetables, and ornamentals.

The purpose of the paper is to enlighten other university extension administrators and faculty on the development, deployment, and results of the University of Florida / IFAS Extension international professional development program. The eight county faculty participating in the international extension training program were glad to share the benefits they felt they received from the participation in the successful professional development experience. Lessons learned and statements of an energized and enlightened county faculty are included in the results. All related information, developed, revised, and updated by the author for University of Florida / IFAS Extension International Programs, is posted at the web site: http://ded.ifas.ufl.edu/IET2001/index.htm.
Introduction

University of Florida /IFAS Extension, during the 2002 program year, was proud to begin a new international extension professional development program for county faculty. The program goals were to provide an introduction, awareness, and first hand experiences to the many opportunities waiting for county faculty in international extension work. In addition to the lessons learned, statements from energized and enlightened county faculty members are included in the outcomes and results.

In Florida, international extension involvement by county faculty of the University of Florida /IFAS Extension was not recognized as a priority by extension administration or extension clientele prior to this professional experience opportunity. International extension programming has been primarily an individual effort by a few county faculty members with personal goals and personal interests. From time to time, county faculty would have been a part of hosting international visitors in Florida, a member of a commodity training program that may have taken place outside of the United States, or have been a member of a small group of faculty working on research projects of a state extension faculty member. County faculty may have traveled abroad with national non-governmental organizations or participated with USAID on short or long term special assignments.

Many times county faculty are discouraged by their clientele with concerns that they, county faculty, would be “giving away” information and practices seen as advantages to production and marketing of crops, livestock, fruits, vegetables and ornamentals. County faculty were concerned that “trips” to another country would be seen as a “vacation” and not seen as part of a county extension faculty work by peers. Other concerns were that an international experience had little meaning to a county faculty member’s annual appraisal or promotion by extension administration.

Major roadblocks of providing international professional development for county extension faculty include funding budgeted by extension administration, a substantial amount of administrative time for the development and operations of an international extension training program and an extension faculty member with expertise in county, state and international experiences. The development, procedures, processes, experiences encountered and outcomes of this international professional development will be shared.

The University of Florida /IFAS Extension international training program was developed and directed by Dr. Pete Vergot, District Extension Director for University of Florida /IFAS Extension. The program began in January of 2002 and continued through May of 2002. The model used was adopted and revised from one which has been successfully developed and implemented at Michigan State University Extension by Dr. Mary Andrews and Dr. Frank Brewer. This model, readings from Agricultural Extension Systems: An International Perspective (Brewer, 2001), and participation of state extension specialists and students from University of Florida/IFAS were all utilized in the seminar discussions. An international field experience to EARTH University and Costa Rica provided for an exciting professional development program.
Objectives and Purpose

The successfully met objectives of the first international extension training program for Florida extension have had a great impact on the participating county faculty by:

- Assisting county faculty to be better able to respond to the needs of individuals and communities impacted by cultural diversity and global interdependence.
- Preparing county faculty in developing international outreach programs for local clientele.
- Improving local county extension programs by helping county faculty apply expanded knowledge and increased cultural sensitivity to local problems and programs.
- Providing county faculty with the opportunity to become involved in overseas projects and education efforts.

Another purpose of the training project and this paper was to enlighten other university extension administrators and county extension faculty on the development, deployment and results of the University of Florida/IFAS Extension international extension professional development program. The model shared gives a template for extension administrators at other land grant universities for development and operation of a successful international extension training program.

Major Educational Activities

Extension administration encouraged and approved funding of a proposal to begin the first international training program for University of Florida/IFAS Extension. Extension Dean Dr. Christine Waddill appointed the author, Dr. Pete Vergot, Associate Professor and District Extension Director, to be the program leader of the professional development program. All related information was developed or revised and updated for the international training program and is posted at the web site: http://ded.ifas.ufl.edu/IET2001/index.htm (Vergot, 2001). All information was posted to preserve and maintain documents from other sources revised or developed for the training program. In addition, this site is used to provide a location for reports from current and future training programs and to serve as a location for marketing extension international programs in the future. The web location also holds links of many other related web sites for the international training program and for county faculty to use in their daily programming.

With the use of an application and review process, eight county faculty members selected were asked to make a strong commitment of time and to be involved in study seminars, a field experience and reading program. Participating county faculty members of the training program were required to have attained permanent status or have six years in extension. Diversity of program area and physical location around the state was a component of their selection. Extension administration being committed to all program areas desired for this group to be representative of the diversity found throughout the state of Florida. County faculty selected matched this expectation and represented both small and large populated counties and all program areas of extension in Florida.
Three multi-day training sessions were held on the campus of University of Florida in Gainesville. Campus faculty, staff and students assisted in the teaching and training during the orientation and seminar sessions held on the campus. The international field experience was held in Costa Rica with faculty and staff members of EARTH (College of Agriculture of the Humid Tropics) University as the hosts. All travel expenses both domestic and international were supported by extension administration.

The University of Florida IFAS International Programs director, Dr. Peter Hildebrand, and assistant director Lisette Stall shared their international expertise with the county faculty members of the training team. State extension specialist Dr. Nick Place assisted in the topic of working as an agent in a foreign country sharing his study of the Polish-Americans Extension Project (Place, Evans, Andrews and Cargo, 2000). State Extension specialist Dr. Mickie Swisher presented topics of extension education in Costa Rica, historical context and current approaches and challenges, and Daniel A. Herrera, an EARTH University graduate, who is a University of Florida graduate student, shared the EARTH University background and student life from a student perspective. Foreign travel from a health perspective was presented prior to administering vaccinations by Karen Brennan, a registered nurse specialist on foreign travel. State specialist Dr. Jerry B. Sartain, professor of Soil and Water Sciences, discussed the EARTH University cooperative agreement with University of Florida /IFAS. EARTH University in Costa Rica was selected as a host site for the international field experience after a visit by the program director and discussions with extension administration and the University of Florida /IFAS International Programs director.

A ten-day international field experience in Costa Rica during April of 2002 provided an international vision for extension and new individual and team skills for the participants. The participants leaped cultural barriers and learned about the people, their language, and their culture of Costa Rica. This training was supported at EARTH University by Ronald Madrigal Barrantes, Coordinator of Strategic Training Program, at EARTH University. EARTH University has developed conference facilities to host local and international visitors on a very beautiful and functioning educational student campus.

EARTH University, located near Guacimo, Costa Rica, is a private, non-profit university dedicated to education in the agricultural sciences and natural resources in order to contribute to sustainable development in the humid tropics by seeking a balance between agricultural production and environmental protection. The web site for EARTH University is http://www.earth.ac.cr/ing/index.html. The ten-day international field experience included opportunities for the county faculty to experience first hand life in another country. From the time the county faculty stepped off the airplane in the capital city of Costa Rica, San Jose, they began their observations and learning experiences. The opportunities included discussions with the faculty of EARTH University programs in teaching and research, campus facilities, food, and projects which are rich in entrepreneurial and community development activities.

Field visits included tours of the research centers of the Ministry of Agriculture of Costa Rica, discussions at clientele teaching sites with extension agents and extension
administrators working for the Ministry of Agriculture. Travel, including an overnight stay on the beautiful Caribbean coast, was completed across the country to the seaport of Limón, to understand the production, markets, and international shipping for subtropical agriculture and natural resources tourism. Stops included a visit to the port where the Dole Company was loading semi truck loads of boxes of bananas on ocean ships headed for port destinations around the world. The new experiences allowed the county faculty many opportunities to share and discuss their own culture and professional experiences.

The most exciting and rewarding component of the planned training experiences included a 24-hour stay with a family of the local villages of Guacimo, an area near EARTH University. Each county faculty member was taken to stay with a local family and was immersed in the culture for the next 24 hours. While faculty experienced difficulties of language and customs, some enjoyed memorable life experiences without the comforts of electricity, hot water, window panes or air conditioning. Some were exposed to the family employment and day-to-day survival of food collection and preparation. In the end, all county faculty expressed this time as “unforgettable and exciting.” Time was also planned for the many natural resource-based tourism experiences that came to be enjoyed at well invited periods along their journey, such as the beautiful rain forests.

After the international field experience in Costa Rica, a two-day reporting and wrap-up session was held on the University of Florida, Gainesville campus. This important activity allowed for the county faculty to share experiences, begin to develop a personalized plan, develop an abstract report for the annual meetings of their professional association, and prepare for a plan for hosting international visitors. During this reporting and wrap-up session, the county faculty and international training program leader informed campus extension administration of the entire international training program, including sessions held on campus and the international field experience. The faculty gave recommendations to the Associate Dean of Extension and IFAS International Programs Director on how the process assisted them and how the next training program could be enhanced to meet the needs of county faculty members for experiences in the future.

**Outcomes and Results**

The county faculty participating in the training program were excited to share the outcomes, results, personal feelings, and benefits they received from the participation in the successful professional development experience. The activity of a final project report, “Report of the International Extension Training Program in Costa Rica” (Vergot, 2002), to extension administration and an internship sponsor opportunity, which resulted directly from the training program, are described. To describe the program outcomes and results, the following quotes by two of the participants of the training program are shared.

“‘The training broadened our understanding of the family structures, cultures, customs, lifestyles and views of people around the world, allowing us to recognize similarities we share and to gain an appreciation of our differences.’” (Converse, 2002)
The apprehensive experience of living 24 hours with their temporary families in their homes allowed the county faculty to observe many different family customs. They also experienced family challenges of no electricity or personal vehicles for travel. Language barriers occurred when most of the county faculty could not speak, read, or write in Spanish and many of the host family members could not converse in English. All families were of lesser financial means than the county faculty members. The county faculty were treated as “family” members by their gracious hosts. In fact, as we share our life stories with our peers we use the term “our family” when referring to our former hosts.

“"The experience created an opportunity to develop a relationship with co-workers from around the state in both a professional and personal capacity that would otherwise not have been possible."" (Converse, 2002).

Spending almost 24 hours a day together for ten days elevated respect for each of the county faculty members who, when at home, are located across the vast Florida peninsula and all programming departments of Extension. The county faculty had to rely on each other for basic living necessities and comfort during the entire field experience, including, for example, the close quarters of travel in a small passenger van with all belongings, asking each other for preferred food locations, learning individual timetables of alertness and emotional references, and the sharing of family and friend communications from “home.” The county faculty members often stated that they will remember each other for many years to come because of this experience as a team.

“"A strengthened commitment and dedication to our jobs energized us when we returned home, and deepened our belief in the function of Extension not only in Florida, USA, but in the world. We have many things to learn from others, but we also have a great amount of valuable knowledge we can teach."" (Converse, 2002).

Everywhere the county faculty traveled their hosts wanted to know what they did as an “extension agent” in Florida. County faculty also shared their background and how each of them was different but served their clientele in a common manner with a common goal. When they talked with their counterparts of the Ministry of Agriculture, they were able to relate the challenges faced by the Costa Rica extension agents as they discussed interment details of salaries received for the many hours that they work for their clientele, administrative and financial support by the University or Ministry, educational requirements of the position, and challenges faced in the day-to-day teaching experiences.

“"We are a rejuvenated group of agents that have a greater appreciation of the support system we have within the University of Florida/IFAS Extension program."" (Brinkley, 2002).

The field experience was very self fulfilling to each of the county faculty members. Most of the county faculty have fulfilled many years of service in which they give of their knowledge and expertise on a daily basis without regard to financial reward or time away from family. The financial commitment and professional opportunity time allowed to each county faculty member by University of Florida/IFAS Extension was well beyond any of
their previous individual experiences. All members stated that they felt exhausted and refreshed from the entire professional training experience, both on campus and in Costa Rica.

The county faculty members involved in the international training program have developed objectives and a personalized plan for sharing the international professional development experience in their annual plan of work for 2003. The county faculty members have shared their experiences with their local county extension advisory committees, County Boards of Commissioners and County Administrators, county faculty team members of the offices across the state, community groups and extension clientele. The extension team prepared and presented an abstract of their professional development training experience during the Florida Association of Extension Professionals annual meeting in September of 2002. During this professional conference, over 50 county extension faculty members expressed the desire to be a part of any future international professional development programs. Funding continues to be an obstacle in continuing a successful program which includes an opportunity for a field experience abroad.

As a result of the international experience one of the county faculty team members, Dr. Henry Grant, county extension director of Gadsden County, was host for an international student intern, of EARTH University of Costa Rica. The student intern spent a semester, 16 weeks, learning from the county extension faculty and state extension specialists of rural Gadsden County, located in the panhandle of northwest Florida. Dr. Grant had additional experiences of working with the campus international programs department were he encountered experiences including, travel and transportation, housing, and reporting required for hosting an international student intern.

**Lessons Used and Learned**

In this section, some of the lessons used and learned from this first experience are shared below. These are a few of the highlights from the total lessons learned.

- Support and adequate budget from extension administration is mandatory for a successful program.
- Selection of a program leader with prior international extension experience and understanding of county faculty experiences is beneficial.
- The training program does not need to be large if the scope or numbers of participants are selected with the use of an application form and are diverse across the program areas of extension.
- Quality of presenters and flexibility among everyone participating, in addition to the use of expertise from personnel of an internal international programs department, is helpful.
- Flexibility by everyone during the entire professional development experience will assist any future program, not every detail can be developed prior to the activities; this was a learning process for everyone.
- Plan for and develop time for team building early in the program, share meal times, have county faculty find and report on components in preparation of the field experience.
- Provide appropriate technology to save on time during the seminar component. The ability to use the web by each participating member is invaluable when unexpected questions arise.
Select a known international partner for the field experience. Travel to the country prior to the beginning of the program is encouraged to set up visits and meet with the people who will assist in presentations while in the country. The selection of a “host” university may also assist in the success.

Give individual members a leadership role for each day. In couples, they can introduce the members of the group to new presenters; gather information for thank you notes and present tokens of appreciation, usually a small gift. Consider something with the campus logo.

Plan feedback and reporting time at the end of each seminar session and at the end of each day while away on the field experience.

Take digital pictures throughout the entire training program. Digital pictures work best as they can be posted to the web for future reflecting and reporting and you only need to “print” the good ones.

Plan for an overall program reporting and reflecting session about three weeks after the end of the entire experience. This gives members time to reflect on their experience, gather thoughts, and organize pictures.

Future Development

To assist county faculty in international programming, the dean of extension has appointed the author as “Extension Liaison” to the University of Florida /IFAS International Programs Department. Plans are underway to continue to provide for an international professional development experience to include both county and state extension faculty members and possibly local decision makers. It is hoped that this approach demonstrates the need for future funding of this type of important extension activity.

A special committee of extension faculty and administrators from around the nation, with interest in internationalizing extension, was assembled in 2002. The National Initiative to Internationalize Extension was funded by CSRESS-USDA to assist states and the national extension system in bringing an international or global focus to programming with domestic audiences. Additional information may be found on the web site located at: http://www.msue.msu.edu/intext/natinit.htm (Andrews, 2002).

References


EARTH University, web site: http://www.earth.ac.cr/ing/index.html

