An International Agriculture Course with an Intercultural Experience

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Introduction
We have been experimenting with international agriculture course offerings for more than 20 years at Penn State University. The course that inspires the most international involvement after student graduation is one that includes an intercultural field trip. Presenting an overview of this capstone course and discussing course elements and activities with faculty from other universities would be beneficial to all concerned. We can share activity-planning strategies, with successes and failures.

Course Agenda
Problem Solving in Tropical Agriculture, IntAg 481, features problem solving in an international setting and provides an opportunity for students to study agricultural development in Puerto Rico, a culture quite different from our own. Students establish objectives, then learn to design a rapid appraisal process to meet those objectives. They lay out their data gathering plan, along with target interview groups, and generate a possible list of questions. They are well-prepared and confident when they actually carry out their plan on site in Puerto Rico. Alongside rapid appraisal methods and techniques, students learn about group processes and teamwork. This is supported through many student-led learning activities in the classroom prior to the field trip. Everyone gets comfortable with everyone else. We also present an in-depth look at the Puerto Rican culture and have participants compare it to our own. Often, this is the first time students have looked critically at their own culture and find weaknesses as well as strengths. The problem solving are applied to ag-related issues such as: a) cropping systems and animal systems management, b) integrated small farms management, c) formal and nonformal rural education, d) knowledge systems, information networks, e) decision-making influences, and f) program planning.

Lessons Learned
Over the years, Penn State faculty have developed a wonderful relationship with the faculty at the University of Puerto Rico – Mayaguez Campus and other field professionals in their extension service, FSA, NRCS, etc. They are the folks we count on to make arrangements with farmers, agency staff, and other ag-industry people that we involve with our interviews and meetings. These relationships are of utmost importance in carrying out a meaningful program and must be nurtured in many ways.

Conclusion and Educational Importance
In addition to supplying students with the tools for international development work, the knowledge and insights gained in IntAg 481 better-prepare students to perform effectively in our own culturally diverse society after graduation. Previous students report that they are more competitive in the job market because they have taken this course, traveled to Puerto Rico, and have gained knowledge and a greater sensitivity to Hispanic cultures and people.