An Assessment of Individual Outcomes from a USDA Technical Assistance Program

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Abstract

The Cochran Fellowship Program (CFP) is one of the US Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) major international technical assistance efforts providing short-term technical assistance training from 1984 through 1999 to over 6,500 individuals from 67 lesser-developed countries. The USDA/CFP administration expects that, upon their return, the participants will be catalysts for change in their businesses or organizations, and hopefully make a difference in their countries. The innovation-decision process through which an individual passes is a well-researched and empirically documented time-ordered sequence of action and decision steps. After learning about new CFP ideas or innovations, participants will not decide about the new ideas or innovations unless they have a positive individual attitude about them. The purpose of this study is to identify and describe outcomes about America for CFP participants. In particular, 178 Poland participant attitude changes were assessed. Descriptive data shows, overall, that attitudes about America changed from before to after the CFP. The greatest positive attitude change from before to after the CFP was about American management style by almost 50% of the respondents, followed by American market economy, American people, and American products. Qualitative text, not yet completely analyzed, is expected to complement the quantitative data.
Introduction

Technical assistance can be defined as “any activity that enhances human and institutional capabilities through the transfer, adaptation, and use of knowledge, skills, and technology” (Wallace, 1990, p. 26). The Cochran Fellowship Program (CFP) is one of the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) major international technical assistance efforts. From 1984 to 1999, over 6,500 selected individuals from 67 lesser-developed countries have participated in the CFP short-term training (USDA, 2000, p. i). Participants are typically agricultural leaders from academia, business, farming, or government. The objectives of the CFP, in general, are to assist developing countries to: 1) develop their agricultural systems for the food and fiber needs of their domestic population, and, 2) strengthen and enhance agricultural trade linkages with the U.S. The USDA/CFP administration expects that, upon their return, the participants will be catalysts for change in their businesses or organizations, and hopefully make a difference in their countries.

The CFP expanded into Central and Eastern Europe almost simultaneously as those countries’ gained their independence from Soviet control. As the first CFP Central European country in 1989, Poland has had 524 agricultural leader participants through 1999. At an average cost of $4,500 per participant, approximately 2.5 million dollars of technical assistance has been provided to Poland by the US over the ten-year period.

Although CFP participants have usually responded positively in end-of-program evaluations about program logistics and subject matter content, there has been limited outcome evaluation. Evaluation should not be based solely on participant’s end-of-program responses, but rather, participants should be tracked after returning to their home country when they have had the time and opportunity to reflect on their training experiences (Blum & Braude, 1990, p. 337).

To measure individual outcomes knowledge gain could be assessed, though an equally important variable to assess is individual attitudes. Attitudes toward new innovation, or perceptions as Rogers (1995, p. 167) defines them, are a major factor in decision-making about the innovation. For CFP participants to be catalysts for change their attitudes about America and American innovations the CFP expects to transfer are vital and should be assessed.

Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of the study, in progress, is to identify and describe individual outcomes that occurred because of the CFP. Two research questions directed this study, one of the research questions will be discussed in this paper: “What attitudes were influenced by the Cochran Fellowship Program for Poland participants?” Objectives of the study describe the attitude change about the: a) American people, b) American products, c) American management style, and d) American market economy.

Methods and Data Sources

The primary research design used to identify and describe individual attitude changes that occurred because of the CFP for participants was a descriptive survey. The research method was a mix of quantitative and qualitative methodologies described by Morse (1991, p. 121) as a “QUAN + QUAL” methodological approach.

The quantitative data collection instrument was a questionnaire mailed to the Poland
CFP participant population. A list of Poland participants was obtained from the USDA/Cochran Program office. The country list was verified by comparing the names with participants listed in the USDA Cochran Fellowship Program annual summary reports from 1991 to 1999. Also incorporated was a partial list of 1989 to 1991 Poland participants provided by the USDA/Poland FAS not on record at the USDA/Cochran Program office. Removed from the list for the study were individuals who attended the training program as staff and translators, or were know to have died.

Using obstacles and data cited by Blum and Braude of international evaluation studies as support (1990, p. 337), a response rate of 35% was determined to be sufficient for this study. There were 187 completed questionnaires returned, a 37% response rate of the adjusted population (N = 499).

The research question, “What attitudes were influenced by the Cochran Program for Poland participants?” was measured by having participants respond to a two-part closed question. Participants were asked to indicate their attitudes first about after the training followed by indicating their attitudes before the training. Response choices about were a five-point Likert scale (1 = very negative, 2 = somewhat negative, 3 = neutral, 4 = somewhat positive, 5 = very positive). The questions focused on four key areas about America: people, products, market economy, and business management style.

Internal consistencies were calculated on the returned questionnaires with Cronbach alpha to measure scale reliability and demonstrate the construct validity of the scales. Cronbach alpha scores ranged from .58 to .72 for after attitudes and .54 to .66 for before attitudes and all items had a substantial correlation with the totals. Next, the data was analyzed by calculating the percent frequency and mean of participants’ responses. Then, the participants’ percent change in attitude from before to after the Cochran Program was calculated.

The qualitative data collection was semi-structured face-to-face interviews with a sample of 30 participants. The non-random purposive sample of participants was developed with input from the USDA/Poland FAS. To determine who was interviewed, a sampling frame was established around the factors of participants’ profession, type of organization, and training year. Geographic dispersion was also taken into account when there was opportunity to conduct interviews with more than one Cochran Program participant in an area.

Final participants interviewed were selected by the researcher to represent a range of professions, types of organizations, training topics, training years, and accessibility on the researcher’s travel routes. Though this was a non-random sample subject to the researcher’s selection effort was given in following-thru with those participants pre-selected including those with no telephone, hard to contact, or reluctant to be interviewed. Using an interview guide the researcher was the instrument and explored for critical incident within the predetermined research theme of attitude change.

Results

Descriptive statistics show, overall, attitudes about America changed from before to after the CFP. This is because prior to the training, most participants reported neutral attitudes in the four areas. The greatest combined positive and very positive attitude change from before to after the CFP was about American management style (48%; 53%-91%).
followed by American market economy (32%; 55%-87%), American people (26%; 65%-91%), and American products (23%; 33%-56%).

Qualitative text is in the process of content analysis for patterns and convergent and divergent examples to assist in identifying and describing attitude change to merge into the study findings. A most impressive narrative to date is a former educator who is now a farm management entrepreneur. In part, he stated, “The CFP helped me get brave and get the American spirit to start my own business.”

Educational Importance

Decisions about innovations are not instantaneous. The innovation-decision process through which an individual passes is a well-researched and empirically documented time-ordered sequence of action and decision steps.

Rogers (1995) contrasts the means of the first step, the knowledge function, to the second step, the persuasion function. Rogers defines persuasion as attitude formation and change on the part of an individual (p. 167). While the mental activity in the knowledge function is mainly cognitive (or knowing), the main type of thinking in the persuasion function is affective (attitudes, feelings) (p. 168). “Attitudes toward an innovation frequently intervene between the knowledge and decision functions,” (Rogers, 1995, p. 167).

Identifying and describing attitude changes at the individual level can provide the USDA/CFP administration with information for future initiatives. Attitude changes can be correlated to participant’s profile such as professional background and the CFP training emphasis.

References


