Abstract

Study abroad programs are increasingly being seen by undergraduate students in the United States as a way to better understand culture, language, and technical information in an international context. But is there a reciprocal benefit to the students that interact with US students? What do our international partners gain when they interact with American students?

One objective was to determine the impact of the program on MSAU students. Another objective was to determine what the students learned in the program. This study focused on collecting qualitative data from a cohort group of ten Russian students who participated in pilot study abroad project.

Russian students indicated that they improved their language skills, knowledge of US culture and had a greater understanding of their own agriculture as a result of this program. Students’ self esteem improved and their confidence in their ability to question was stronger as a result of the program. Russian students learned teaching methods that they will be able to use in their future teaching activities.

If the benefits gained from this program could be replicated in other parts of Russia, it could serve as a model for change in Russian system of higher agricultural education.
Background information

Study abroad programs are increasingly being seen by undergraduate students in the United States as a way to better understand culture, language, and technical information in an international context. This past year, fifteen percent more students in the United States opted for a study abroad program as a way to gain these perspectives (Desruisseaux, 1999). Many believe that US students are motivated to study abroad to gain some level of employment advantage by acquiring international knowledge and experience. Among other interests, increasingly students want to prepare themselves for the new global economy. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education, (1999) there were 113,959 students from the United States that studied abroad in 1997-1998 school year. In 1997-1998 there were 1,145 students American students studying in Russia and this represented a 5% decline from 1996-1997 school year (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1999). In total, 9.3% of all US baccalaureate degree students studied abroad in 1998 (98|99 open doors, 1999). Michigan State University was first with more than 1,400 students and Penn State University ranked eleventh in the nation with 876 students who studied abroad (98|99 open doors, 1999).

For agriculture students, study abroad programs enhance the student’s college experience by providing a meaningful opportunity to directly learn about international agriculture in the context of the country. It can also mean that students have the opportunity to gain specific country-based knowledge that is not available in textbooks or by any other means. While culture can be studied effectively in the classroom, most agree that there really is no better way to understand a culture than by going to a country and experiencing it first hand.

As we move closer to developing a truly global economy, many scholars believe that it is becoming increasingly important to internationalize the curricula. To truly internationalize the curricula means an integration of global ideas, problem solving skills, and understanding of the relationships between broad international concepts in many dimensions of the curricula. This means taking a local or state problem and determining how to solve it in the broadest context. To enable students to more effectively compete as graduates in the world, colleges of agriculture must broaden the concept of the classroom and be inclusive of international networking and active learning that comes with being a partner in global teaching situations. To meet these needs, colleges of agriculture throughout the world are increasingly seeking opportunities for their students to participate and learn these concepts to make them competitive in the world market.

If students from the United States benefit from participation in international programs, it seems likely that there must be some reciprocal benefit to the students who interact with them in the host country. What are the benefits to host country students? How have these programs impacted their lives? What components of the program did they gain the most from? It is important to understand the extent that host country students benefit from the interaction of American students. Furthermore, it could be useful to international study abroad program designers to understanding the impact of learning, interaction effects, and the specific impact of participation by host country students.

Purpose and Objectives
The purpose of this paper is to describe a collaborative study abroad program where Russian and American students studied together in a common education program at Moscow State Agroengineering University. One objective was to determine the impact of the program on MSAU students. Another objective was to determine what the students learned in the program.

**Program background**

During the past two years, Penn State and Moscow State Agroengineering University (MSAU) have conducted joint classes at MSAU (common education program). Twenty Penn State undergraduate students, seven professors from the US, and three graduate students took part. From the Russian side, a cohort group of 10 students took courses for two consecutive spring semesters while seven Russian professors and one graduate student taught in the program. This program should be considered to be a small pilot experimental project. There were many characteristics and innovations used in this program that further explain how this program was unique. For example, all of the courses were taught in English. The three-credit US-based courses were taught intensively in one-month blocks. The MSAU students studied and worked together on projects with their American peers. All of the courses were taught using Western-style teaching methods such as case studies, two-person teams using laptop computers, student-centered activities, interactive discussions, and most of the course work was highly participatory and interactive. Students also increased their learning about Russian agriculture by attending the Russian/American seminar and learning directly about agribusiness prospects in Moscow and in Russia. To make this program possible, MSAU administrators devised a totally new curriculum in the International Faculty.

**Methods**

At the conclusion of the two-year program an open-ended questionnaire was developed to collect information from the Russian students. This instrument was adapted from one that is used by the International Office at Penn State to determine the impact of study abroad programs on Penn State students. During the final week of the spring semester 2000, the ten Russian students were asked to provide their written responses on the questionnaire. The questionnaires were given to the students and they were asked to return them the following week -- thereby attempting to reduce their writing anxiety and provide ample time to provide a complete response. It was unlikely that the students conferred with each other as the responses were written from their own perspectives. The researcher also taught these same students and most importantly there was no grade or obligation tied to the questionnaire. The data were collected over the next ten days and then analyzed using the bins approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994).
Results

The following writings represent a compilation of direct responses from the questionnaire as written by MSAU students. Also included is a selection of specific questions asked of the students.

What did you learn about people, agriculture, and US culture?
American people like to communicate, are helpful, polite, happy all of the time, they are more easy-going, they are proud of their country and education is important to Americans. They prefer to work individually rather than in-groups because they want to know the results of their work. But in general, American people are like Russians; education is important to Americans.
Americans wear boots in their rooms, and have a different educational system than we do and most farms in the US are private farms.
Americans are job-oriented and interested in other cultures (Russian). Family is important to American students.
Behavior of people is more free and democratic.
Agriculture is protected and supported in the US and it is more developed than in Russia.
Students are independent from parents.
American teachers like to communicate with students whereas in Russian there is a distance between teachers and students.

How did you change as a result of this program?
I have become more communicative and self-confident. I can understand another mentality. Now I feel there is a real possibility to develop agriculture in our country. But I need to know more… Now when Americans speak I can understand almost all of what they say. I can translate quickly and I understand almost all of the words and I can do my assignments in English.
Now I am not afraid to communicate with foreign people. It has become more interesting.
After participating in this program I became more interested in American life, culture, I hope I will visit the US in the future.
I am different. I have great plans for the future. I plan to study outside Russia. These are just plans – but I would never have thought about this before this program.
I have changed my relationship with Russian professors – now I am not afraid to ask questions – even silly questions.

What aspect of the program did you gain the most?
We improved our English skills the most because we spoke only in English with native speakers. Also we developed good friendships because Americans are so friendly, open-minded, and interested in communicating.
We also got a good experience because American professors were very good (communication and knowledgeable). All of the experience I will be able to apply to Russian agricultural development.
I feel more independent and I know what to do and how to do. Creative assignments impressed me most of all.
I like the work in the Internet because it was exciting and will also be useful to me in my future work. I also like to learn how to make transparencies, case studies, and I am sure, as a teacher I will use it and it will help me.
I was able to improve my understanding of other people and culture. If I didn’t understand anything during the class period I can ask about the subject from the teacher or from students at a later time.

Educational Importance

Russian students can effectively learn and may prefer some of the Western-style teaching methods. MSAU students saw value in the methodology used and the relationships that they developed with their peers. Programs like this can be effective in helping to bridge the cultural gap between Russian and American students. Russian students gained many positive benefits in participating in this program. They became more confident in their language, their self-empowerment, and interests. They learned a lot of culture from their American counterparts and they learned about themselves. Their knowledge base of agriculture grew and their appetite for more knowledge increased. They learned teaching skills that they can directly apply in Russia and they learned about similarities and differences of the cultures and people.

Implications

Typically the evaluations and impact of American study abroad programs focus on the domestic students and what benefit these programs have had on them. There is often a reciprocal impact and that is on the students who come in contact with American students. These MSAU students apparently had a positive learning experience and they personally grew from the program. Not surprisingly, one of the major benefits of programs like this is the opportunity for international students to gain language skills. Forcing the students to work together in two-person teams was one way that the designers believed that would force the development of language skills and also greater understanding of culture and values. It seems clear that MSAU students got much more than language skill benefits out of these student-to-student relationships.

It is not always obvious that US students don’t leave a negative impression with the people that they interact with. This open-ended approach provided the opportunity for students to address this perspective and none of the students chose to weave any negative comments into their narrative. Also, no questions specifically addressed this issue. Perhaps in future evaluations this dimension needs to be explored and integrated into the survey instrument.

The Russian education experience is known to produce high quality engineers and scientist that have excellent basic mathematics, physics, and chemistry knowledge. However this same Russian education system is known for its rigidity and lack of imagination in use of teaching methodology. By most accounts, lecture and traditional laboratories predominate the Russian style of teaching. If
Russian institutions of higher learning are going to change, perhaps this might be more likely to happen if administrators can observe the benefits gained with their own students when a variety of teaching approaches are used in programs like these. If this is true, given the specific language, culture, and learning benefits that students identified here and the potential for institutional benefits -- then perhaps more pilot programs like this should be developed and integrated across the Russian system of higher education. Perhaps through small-integrated steps gained in programs like these, the Russian system of higher education can begin to make the reforms needed to ensure that its students are better prepared for the global market.

References


