Barriers to International Involvement

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Abstract

Barriers exist, real or imaginary, regarding the internationalization of courses, departments, colleges and the university as a whole. This paper identified several inhibiting factors and categorized them into "internal" or "external" factors. The identification of these barriers and their accompanying strategies for overcoming them will assist the sojourners in making their excursion abroad more enjoyable and fruitful.

Keywords: International Agriculture, Experiential, Study Abroad, Barriers, Participation

Introduction

Why does a person choose to travel abroad, to conduct research, or to teach at a foreign university? Most major universities have mission statements containing references to internationalization. Mission statements from many colleges and universities state that their purpose is develop teaching, research, and outreach programs that serve people in the state, the nation and the world. New Mexico State University’s “Strategic Directions, Benchmarks and Performance Indicators: Activities/Targets for 2001-2002” states that “NMSU must have an international outlook in its teaching, research, and service programs to prepare its students and other clientele to live and work in this changing environment”. How can these missions be realized if professors and researchers are hesitant to teach or work abroad (Kelsey & Dormody, 1995)? Do barriers exist that inhibit the participation in international activities? Are there motivators that enable the participant to embrace these opportunities?

Purpose

Barriers exist, real or imaginary, regarding the internationalization of courses, departments, colleges and the university as a whole. Holly Carter, in Charles Klasek’s Bridges to the Future (1992) states, “We must increase the number of faculty involved in international education.” (p.49). With this admonishment and with the number of programs and staff development activities available, why are so many educators hesitant or reluctant to become involved in international work? Most universities provide many if not all of the following services to their faculty members: language training, country briefings, regular secondments/sabbaticals, faculty exchange programs, general orientation seminars and mentorship (Davies, 1992, as cited in Klasek, 1992). Are these types of support, along with university mission statements, enough to overcome personal concerns and professional limitations regarding the value of international experience?

Jones and Crawford (1985) indicated that involvement in international work appears to be decreasing at a time when the need is projected to grow. Henson’s 1990 study of the university internationalization process stated that internationalization was generally regarded as something that was difficult for some to understand and comprehend. Many promotion and tenure policies and actions at universities across the nation appear to be restrictive in the promotion of international work by untenured faculty (Kelsey & Dormody, 1995; Aigner, Nelson & Stimpfl, 1992; Hertford & Hartley, 1987; Jones and Crawford, 1985; Perez & Rogers, 1984; SAIC, 1990; Whitefield & Schmidt, 1989). Can this reticence be linked to personal characteristics or factors within the control of the individual?
A study published in the Spring 1997 Journal of International Agricultural and Extension Education (JAIEE) by Sammons and Martin found that among graduate students at Iowa State University, barriers to international involvement, such as financial considerations, lack of awareness, and interruption of the academic program needed to be addressed if increased participation was the desired outcome. Similar studies also indicate that one of the primary concerns of faculty members getting involved in international was “the general university environment in which an individual faculty member works plays an important role in his/her participation in international activities” (Akpan & Martin, 1996).

Acker and Scanes (2000) concluded that graduate students should be spending sojourns in laboratories or conducting field research at a foreign university or international agricultural research center if they are to develop an appreciation for and an interest in international opportunities. Likewise they go on to state that “There needs to be a broader recognition of the importance of globalizing agricultural research and a commitment to increasing exchanges and funding related to research of this nature. International graduate students and exchanges of students and faculty members are critical mechanisms to globalizing agricultural research.”

Figure 1. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.
Theoretical/Philosophical Theme

In 1954, Abraham Maslow utilized a hierarchical system of behavioral motives in which the lower level needs are more physiologically based and higher level needs are more psychologically based. This system was subsequently revised to include two levels below “self actualization” and one level above (Figure 1). The desire or felt need to become involved internationally would or could be linked more to these higher level or psychological levels.

Atkinson and Birch (1970) extended Maslow’s hierarchy to the case of multiple alternatives (Figure 2). The implication is that the magnitude of the instigating force for a specified activity will depend upon the frequency of prior reinforcement for that activity (Atkinson, 1992).

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A = \frac{FA}{CA + FB + CB + \ldots + FN}
\]

Where \( FA, FB, \ldots FN \) refer to the magnitudes of the instigating forces for activities \( A, B, \ldots N \); \( CA, CB, \ldots CN \) refer to the consummatory values of those activities, and the ratio \( F/c \) in each case refers to the asymptotic strength of the tendency \( TA, TB, \ldots TN \), in a given setting. The latter is the level at which the strength of the tendency would become stable if the activity were to continue uninterrupted for a sustained period of time (p.35).

By concentrating on these instigating factors, we should be able to probe the internal motivational factors that contribute to a person’s proclivity to participate in international work.

From a practical point of view, this formula provides a measure for determining an individual’s self-motivation for, and internal barriers to, international involvement. Further, it helps faculty and/or administrators to provide assistance in overcoming these internal barriers. Just as programs are in place to assist with cultural and language barriers, programs need to be designed to assist the individual in finding that internal, personal motivation to become involved. Maurice Harari (1992) summed up the feelings of many educators involved in international education when he stated: “Since the students we now help educate will live in a highly interdependent and multicultural world … they need also to acquire … knowledge and skills with respect to the interconnectedness of peoples and societies and cross-cultural communication” (p.53).

Note. Adopted from Kelsey (1995) and Tritz (1997), modified at the 18th Annual AIAEE Conference in Durban, South Africa.
Results

Several factors preclude individuals from enjoying or wanting to pursue international work. Barriers, both external and internal such as those listed in Figure 3 are often the most visible and most widely used to explain or account for the lack of participation in international work. The necessity to be “seen” and involved in their departments often gives professors a way out. At a recent international conference of agricultural and extension educators in Durban, South Africa, the barriers identified in figure 3 were discussed. Represented at this roundtable discussion group in Durban were more than 100 years of accumulated international experience. Discussion regarding these barriers yielded consensus that they are very real and can and do act as deterrents to international participation (personal communication; round table discussion group, May, 2002). These deterrents discussed may include certain innate fears or apprehensions regarding the country or culture. The apparent barrier of another language and the fear of not being able to communicate or of being “less articulate” in a second language certainly can affect one’s desire to participate in international projects. Certain prejudices may come into play concerning the people, culture or even the climate of the country. The fear of political unrest and the insecurity that this instills may contribute to a lack of desire to work, teach or study abroad.

Implications

Admitting and facing one’s fears are key to finding a solution. Hatesohl in International Agriculture (1994) gave several suggestions for becoming more comfortable with international work. These suggestions included: understanding the purpose and scope of the assignment; learning all one can about the project, the country and its people; and starting the work in-country with an open mind (p.303). Discussions at the Durban conference lead to three traits or requirements that an individual should possess before seeking to work internationally. First, they should “like people”; second, they should be able to get along with people; and third, they should possess a feeling of benevolence toward their fellow human being (personal communication; round table discussion group, May, 2002).

Efforts to increase faculty participation in international endeavors should be of great importance for Colleges of Agriculture around the world. The reduction or elimination of the external barriers to participation should be examined in order to insure that there are competent, skilled professionals willing and able to carry their institutions missions to other countries. Those administrators responsible for the current promotion and tenure systems should be encouraged to address these issues.

By looking at the internal motivations it is possible to work toward finding solutions for them. Acknowledging these fears, coupled with a desire to overcome them will provide the strength to see beyond the physical barriers to international work and confront the innate fears that hold one back. The opportunities to teach, study and serve internationally are increasing. As the borders between nations disappear and accessibility to people and culture increases due to improved communication, ease of travel, computer, internet, and satellite connections develop, we will see new avenues and prospects for international involvement arise. There is nothing to lose, and a whole world to gain.

References


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