International Experience: Pathways to Personal and Professional Growth

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Abstract

A study was conducted to determine the specific components of international experience and involvement that lead to personal and professional effects among Extension professionals and near-associates. The variables were correlated to determine what factors were important in predicting self-assessed personal, family, and professional outcomes from the PAEP (Polish American Extension Project) experience.

This study revealed the importance of international involvement for enhancing globalization benefits among Extension professionals, colleagues, clientele, and family members. Those who have an opportunity to live and work in another country not only contribute to the development of that country, but they also contribute numerous mutual benefits within America, including greater international appreciation and integration of global components into ongoing educational programs. Lessons and practices were learned from this study that can lead to enhanced international outcomes across participants and near-associates based upon endeavors that are properly designed and implemented. Training is a critical component for maximizing overall benefits from international assignments, and it is necessary across three important junctures: before one goes (pre-training), while one is there (reinforcement), and after one returns (de-briefing).

Introduction

For nearly a century, Cooperative Extension has provided nonformal education and information throughout the US. Extension programming has changed from what was initially offered, but a consistent feature has been focusing upon relevant clientele needs. Because of greater global interdependence, today’s Extensionists have incorporated various international education efforts, and many times this stems from Extensionists becoming directly involved in international exchanges or hosting foreign visitors. These efforts have served to increase international awareness, understanding, interests and involvement among Extension professionals (Place, Evans, Andrews, and Crago, 2000; Ludwig, 1999; Williams and Brewer, 2000).

An integral part of Extension’s international involvement that has recently received attention is the personal and professional benefit that is attained through such efforts. Studies are documenting the positive effects that Extension faculty and agents derive from their actual participation in an international endeavor (Place et al., 2000; Williams and Brewer, 2000). These studies have reported that professionals have experienced increased international awareness and understanding, incorporation of international components into Extension programming, improved self-esteem, and many have profited from a renewed interest in their Extension career. Additionally, they found that people outside of an actual international project have experienced various levels of benefit.

Because of these benefits and the need for internationalizing extension education, there has been greater emphasis in this area (Knight, 2000; Ludwig, 1999). As a grass-roots educational organization, extension is particularly poised to extend a global perspective among communities, and this only occurs when its people are actively involved. A proactive and collaborative approach that encourages international involvement creates the
The focus for this study was the Polish-American Extension Project (PAEP) which was an agricultural technical assistance program designed to address the needs of Poland in relation to agricultural production, management, Extension methodologies, and free-market economics. The PAEP was initiated in 1989 and ended in 1996, and it was mainly focused upon improving the Polish agriculture structure through increasing agricultural production efficiency and improving rural quality of life. The project was established as a joint educational project of the United States Department of Agriculture’s Extension Service (USDA-ES) and the Polish Ministry of Agriculture and Food Economy’s (MAFE) Agricultural Advisory Service. Between 1990 and 1995, more that 100 American Extension professionals representing 31 land grant universities traveled to Poland to work on this project. Over the period of the project, 70 Extension professionals representing 26 states served one or more six-month assignments as advisors at provincial-level agricultural advisory centers (Osrodek Doradztwa Rolniczego ODRs) in Poland (Place et al., 2000). This group of 70 PAEP participants was the population for this study.

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study was to determine the specific components of international involvement that lead to personal and professional benefits among Extension professionals and near-associates. Near-associates were defined as those who had close contact with the actual PAEP participant, and this included colleagues, clientele and family members. There were four objectives of the study: to determine factors related to personal and professional benefit among project participants; to determine benefit-related factors among immediate and extended family members, and; to determine benefit-related factors among Extension colleagues and clientele. The fourth objective of the study was to evaluate the benefit of pre-training, reinforcement, and de-briefing related variables on the self-assessed outcomes of the PAEP.

Methods and Data Sources
A comprehensive questionnaire was developed to focus on the stated study objectives, and an expert panel of faculty from Penn State University and Michigan State University then reviewed it for content and face validity. The instrument was pilot tested among a group of individuals from Penn State University who had knowledge of international technical assistance programs. The 19-page questionnaire consisted of nine major sections: work and living environment; perceptions about the international experience; respondent and home Extension unit characteristics while in Poland; characteristics of the U.S. Extension unit and community while in Poland; nature of the assignment in Poland; the U.S. international Extension climate; reentry and adjustment; output and visibility; and key linkages. Survey methodologies as recommended by Dillman et al. (1995) were utilized for the study. The questionnaire and a cover letter were sent to the 70 PAEP participants. Completed questionnaires were requested to be returned in an enclosed self-addressed and postage-paid envelope (Dillman et al., 1995). After two waves of personal phone calls and re-mailings of the instrument, there were 67 returns for an overall response rate of 95.7%. Subsequent data analysis showed no difference between early and late respondents.

Data were coded and entered into a preset SPSS quantitative analysis program. Basic statistical analysis tests were initially conducted for observation of means, modes, frequencies and standard deviations. Through the use of Factor Analysis, like variables were grouped and summed to create variable blocks for analysis. Cronbach’s alpha reliability was conducted on each variable block, and standardized alpha coefficients ranged from .61 to .92. Items that were not indexed were used as individual variables. These blocks of variables and individual variables were correlated with three dependent variables: the extent of personal and professional effects on PAEP participants, extent of effects on immediate and extended family members of PAEP participants, and extent of effects upon colleagues and clientele of PAEP participants. Qualitative data from the questionnaire were entered into a word
Results and Conclusions

The three dependent variables utilized in this study are reported as perceived by PAEP participants. These variable were self-assessed in the following way: 1) Please rate your perception of the overall impact of the Polish assignment on you personally and professionally; 2) Please rate your perceptions of the overall impact of the Polish assignment on your immediate and extended family; 3) Please rate your perceptions of the overall impact of the Polish assignment on your colleagues and clientele. Participants (N=67) perceived that they received the greatest benefit (8.5) from the PAEP, followed by their family members (6.8) and colleagues/clientele (5.2). Each dependent variable was derived from an 11-point scale that ranged from 0 = no impact to 10 = extensive impact. The middle point in the eleven-point scale is 5, thus the effect upon colleagues and clientele is only slightly positive and relatively minor among the three groups that were assessed in this study. Even though this is only a slight positive effect, it was an area where a negative result could be reasonably expected. A potential area of concern could have been the time away from the home office, but this turned out to not be a major concern. The use of people to backfill in some of these temporarily vacant positions helped to minimize the void that was created.

The majority of the PAEP participants were male (75%) while 25% were female. Most participants were married (73%), and the remaining 27% were either separated/divorced/widowed or single. Participants were well educated as 43% held or were in the process of obtaining doctorate degrees, 54% held or were attaining master’s degrees, and only 3% held a bachelor’s degree as their highest degree. There was wide variation of age among participants (ranging from 30 - 39 years to over 69 years), and most were in the 50 to 59 years of age category. Likewise, there was also a wide range of years of employment with Extension (1 to 40 years). The mean years of Extension employment was 19 years.

Multivariate Analysis. The multivariate analysis was conducted through multiple linear regression. A reduced or parsimonious model was utilized for each of the dependent variables. All of the variables that had a statistically significant correlation with the dependent variable were placed simultaneously into a regression model. Variables that were not statistically significant in the regression model were removed, leaving only the significant variables, which are presented, in the following tables. Each table presents the regression coefficients (b), the standard error of the coefficient (SE of b), and the standardized beta (Standardized B). The standardized beta enabled comparisons of relative strength of each variable within the model.

Personal and Professional Effect. Table 1 presents the reduced regression model for Personal and Professional Effect. All variables in the model are statistically significant at the .05 level or better. The overall Adjusted R² for the model is .31, meaning that 31% of the variation within the model is explained. The most important variable in the model, as seen in the standardized beta, is “Changed Perspective on Self.” This relationship indicates that the greater positive change in self-perception as a result of the PAEP was significantly related to the overall positive benefit on the personal and professional life of the participants. This suggests that among the ways participants are affected by the exchange experience, self-perception is very important. This also suggests that international experience positively changed participants.

The second most important variable was “Visibility of Your Assignment.” Respondents who proactively made their assignment visible reported a more positive overall benefit. Visibility of Assignment assesses whether the participants communicated with clientele and colleagues through calls, press releases, or newsletters before, during, or after the Polish assignment. This indicates that it is important for program participants to relate their international experiences to their acquaintances. The variable Visibility of Your Assignment relates to the pre-training, reinforcement, and de-briefing junctures. Participants were encouraged during the pre-training to communicate openly with U.S. stakeholders. During the participants’ experience, again, they were encouraged to openly communicate to keep their role in the project visible. Furthermore, participants were encouraged to share their international
experiences with U.S. colleagues and clientele upon their return home. These results show that increased visibility positively affected the reported overall outcome. This variable also indicated that respondents with master’s degrees reported more positive overall benefit than those with doctorates. Perhaps this is due to the fact that those with master’s degrees have fewer opportunities for international assignments, so therefore they valued it more.

Table 1

Regression Analysis of Personal and Professional Effect and the Significant Independent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE of b</th>
<th>Standardized B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visibility of Your Assignment</td>
<td>.042*</td>
<td>.019</td>
<td>.263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Education Level</td>
<td>-.275*</td>
<td>.130</td>
<td>-.213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed Perspective on Self</td>
<td>.565*</td>
<td>.185</td>
<td>.343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>6.755*</td>
<td>.837</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

* = .05 N=67

Effect on Immediate and Extended Family. Table 2 presents the reduced regression model of “Effect on Immediate and Extended Family.” Four variables are statistically significant in this model and they account for 38 percent of explained variation in the model. The best predictor in this model was Family Members Accompanied on assignment. Those participants who traveled with their families were more likely to have a positive effect on family life than those participants that did not. Position and Relationships in Extension was the second most important variable in the analysis, and this related to influences that participants experienced within their extension organization and with near-associates. The international experience served to create positive personal relationships, and this was an important contributing factor for a positive family effect. Age was the third most important variable. Respondents that were older tended to report a more positive family benefit. Older participants are likely to have grown children who are out of the household or are capable of taking care of themselves during the international experience. When participants are younger, family participation can help counter any negative effects on family during the assignment. Last, Visibility of Your Assignment tended to positively affect family. It may be that higher visibility in participation has the effect of justifying or rationalizing any short-term hardships related to the assignment. Once again, visibility of assignment was emphasized at the pre-training and reinforcement junctures, and those participants that followed through not only reported more positive overall outcomes for themselves, but also for their families.

Table 2

Regression Analysis of Effect upon Immediate and Extended Family and the Significant Independent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE of b</th>
<th>Standardized B</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family Members Accompanied</td>
<td>1.960*</td>
<td>.603</td>
<td>.351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visibility of Your Assignment</td>
<td>.071*</td>
<td>.031</td>
<td>.215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position &amp; Relationships in Extension</td>
<td>.458*</td>
<td>.221</td>
<td>.245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.596*</td>
<td>.228</td>
<td>.228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-2.101*</td>
<td>1.010</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* = .05 N=67
Effect upon Colleagues and Clientele. The last dependent variable and reduced regression model, Effect on Colleagues and Clientele, is presented in Table 3. The model had an adjusted $R^2$ of .46, and there are three significant variables. Awareness of Assignment was the best predictor. When participants perceived that colleagues and friends were aware of their assignment, they tended to indicate a more positive benefit among colleagues and clientele. “Visibility of Your Assignment” was the second most important variable, and the nature of the relationship is similar to that of “Awareness.” Last, higher reporting of the “Extent of Work Communication” was associated with higher reported positive benefits for colleagues and clientele. All three significant variables in the analysis of the effect on colleagues and clientele are related to all three junctures of the international experience (pre-training, reinforcement, and de-briefing).

Table 3

Regression Analysis of Effect upon Colleagues and Clientele and the Significant Independent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>SE of b</th>
<th>Standardized B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visibility of Your Assignment</td>
<td>.095*</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>.275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of Your Assignment</td>
<td>.177*</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>.328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent of Work Communication</td>
<td>.145*</td>
<td>.061</td>
<td>.261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-4.408*</td>
<td>1.438</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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* = .05 N=67

Awareness of assignment and the visibility of assignment variables affected participants’ assessment of a positive benefit among their colleagues and clientele. Once again, participants were instructed at all three junctures to work on communications that would make their experience visible. To the degree they accomplished this, there was a corresponding improvement on the effects that were assessed in this study. The extent of work communication specifically assessed communication with the participant with the home office during the international experience. Increased contact with the home office increased the positive assessment of the effect upon colleagues and clientele.

Discussion

The results of this study have demonstrated that Extension professionals perceive personal and professional growth for themselves and near-associates through international experience. Blocks of variables examined included: their work and living environment, perceptions about their international experience, the nature of the international assignment, the U.S. Extension climate, reentry and adjustment, output and visibility of the assignment, and demographic characteristics.

The international experience positively affected self-perception. This experience seems to have led to new perspectives of new people and places and self-actualization. Participation in the PAEP was done voluntarily as a means to help fellow Extensionists in need after the fall of the communist bloc in Poland. Additionally, American participants enjoyed a high level of esteem from Polish colleagues and clientele, and this further reinforced the positive self-perception. The cumulative effect of these factors was a positive overall outcome from the PAEP.

Visibility of assignment was the only variable that was statistically significant across all three domains of effect. This variable measured the extent to which participants continued to communicate to others about the assignment. It is important for participants to understand that the experience continues even after they return from an international assignment. This may be due to the fact that the more people who are familiar with the international assignment, even after the fact, the more positive the benefit broadly among near-associates. Visibility skills need to be an integral part of any type of training for international
assignments. Positive effects upon colleagues and clientele were enhanced through communication during the assignment. This included creating awareness and communicating with colleagues and clientele while in Poland. The nature of the relationship showed that if participants did not actively communicate during the assignment, it led to more negative outcomes.

The family effect model indicated that participants whose family accompanied them perceived a greater benefit among their immediate and extended family. The PAEP provided little direct assistance to families, but their involvement was enabled, and these findings document the importance for family involvement in these types of international endeavors whenever possible. Also, older participants perceived a greater benefit within this variable. This may be due to the fact that these participants had greater life experiences to share through the assignment. Furthermore, they may have greater familial flexibility as compared to younger counterparts. Lastly, it is important that international assignments not be restricted to doctoral-level faculty. The data show that master’s level participants benefit to a higher degree over those with more education. A possible explanation for this is that people with master’s degrees tend to have fewer international opportunities, so perhaps they valued it more.

Based upon the findings from this study, it was implied that there are three important training junctures for international assignments: before one goes (pre-training), while one is there (reinforcement), and after one returns (de-briefing). The PAEP utilized a strategy of pre-training, reinforcement, and de-briefing, although it was unknown exactly how important each component could be in relation to the quality of the participants’ experiences. There was some variation in the level of individual participant follow-up at each training juncture. We would expect that those participants that indicated a greater degree of participation and follow-up at each juncture would tend to report better outcomes from the PAEP.

Limitations of the Study

The relatively small number of cases in the study (N=67) necessitated an analysis strategy that utilized only a few variables in each model. None of the presented models have more than four independent variables so to avoid issues that might arise with lower ratio of variables to cases. There are numerous variables that could be added to the model to improve the explained variation, but the limited sample size might cause the model to become unstable. In addition, it is not possible to present or leave the non-significant variables in the multivariate model, although all bivariate relationships were examined and significant variables were included in the final models. As a result, a conservative approach was taken and the number of variables in the multivariate analysis was limited by focusing on those with the most explanatory power. Further studies could improve this research by having more participants in the study design and by utilizing more extensive variable modeling. Having family members, colleagues, and clientele directly assess the personal effect of the PAEP could have further strengthened the study. Unfortunately, this was not a part of the original study’s design, but should be incorporated in further research. The last dependent variable, “Effect upon Colleagues and Clientele” was less precise than it should have been, and as a result, we were unable to separate and differentiate the extent of effect upon each group. Similarly, these effects should be assessed independently in future studies.

Educational Importance

This study has substantiated the importance of international involvement for enhancing global knowledge and understanding, and subsequently, the effect among Extension professionals, colleagues, clientele and family members. Those who have an opportunity to live and work in another country not only contribute to the development of that country, but they also contribute numerous mutual benefits within America. Lessons and practices have been learned from this study that will lead to enhanced outcomes of international assignments. Positive implications are more probable among participants as well as their families and near-associates through participation in programs that are properly designed and implemented.
There are a number of direct implications for those who facilitate international experiences. This study shows that there are three important junctures for international assignments: before one goes (pre-training), while one is there (reinforcement), and after one returns (de-briefing). Important information to share for pre-training aside from culture, logistics, health, and other basic issues includes enabling family members to participate. Pre-training also needs to consist of guidance about communicating to colleagues and clientele before, during, and after an assignment as well as conflict management. Important issues for reinforcement while on assignment include communicating to colleagues and clientele, and utilizing means to increase awareness and understanding of the assignment. Upon returning from an international assignment it is important to understand that the assignment needs to be incorporated into Extension work, to follow-through on things that commenced on the assignment, and to continue to tell the story of the international experience. It is vitally important for those who facilitate international assignments to convey to participants the important factors of a positive experience through pre-training, reinforcement and debriefing.

References


