Tools of the Profession

Developing a Contemporary International Agricultural Course Using Experts

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Abstract

There has been increasing interest in international agriculture and courses to teach it. At the same time, instruction on international agriculture topics varies a great deal from one college of agriculture to another. The primary purpose of the paper is to describe the innovative process used at Virginia Tech to develop a new graduate level course on international agriculture with the title “Developing Agricultural and Extension Programs in Sustainable Food Systems.” A secondary purpose is to share a successful course development procedure with other universities that might like to emulate it.

A multi-step process was utilized to develop the new international agriculture course. The process proved successful and created an innovative and useful course first taught in the spring semester of 2004 and has currently been approved as a permanent course.

Keywords: International Agriculture, Globalization, Distance Delivery, Course Development
Background

Instruction in international agriculture has varied dramatically from one college of agriculture to another, as well as among departments in colleges of agriculture. At the same time, it is evident that the need for such instruction is great at many educational levels. For example, Bell and Christiansen (2000) identified restraints facing the improvement and implementation of international instruction in secondary agriculture.

More recently, Connors (2003) reported studying FFA members who had participated in the Costa Rica Travel Seminar had positive attitudes towards international travel and learning about international agriculture. However, they had received little instruction as part of their secondary agriculture program. Connors recommended that:

- Efforts should be made to increase the amount of international agriculture topics covered in secondary and postsecondary agriculture programs.
- Students participating in international agriculture study tours should receive instruction on the society, culture, and agriculture of the country being visited before the tour begins. Additional instructional time should be included during the tour and debriefing offered at the conclusion. (p. 70)

Radhakrishna, Leite, and Domer (2003) studied the attitudes of students who participated in the Pennsylvania Governor’s School for Agricultural Sciences and determined that “efforts should be continued to infuse international agricultural concepts into the curricula in our schools, colleges, and universities” (p. 86). Specific topics recommended for study were:

- “…understanding of the major regions in the world, major regions in the United States, interdependency of nations, and how were the United States’ relationships with other countries relative to political, economic, and humanitarian issues” (p. 86).

In a study reported in 2000, Knight, Elliott, and Krenzer found a great deal of interest on the part of Arizona Extension personnel for work in the international arena. They noted that:

- About half of the Extension personnel have included an international dimension into their Extension efforts.
- However, ninety-two percent of the participants indicated an interest in for including international efforts into future Extension programs. Sixty-five percent of the participants expressed an interest in an out-of-country assignment. (p. 9)

Ludwig & McGirr (2003) reported that Cooperative Extension has established a national initiative to strengthen its international dimension. The same authors stated:

- This system consists of a partnership between the U. S. Department of Agriculture’s Cooperative, State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES); state extension services at land-grant colleges and universities in every state and territory; and local extension offices in more than 3,000 counties. In today’s era of heightened globalization, this system is increasingly viewed as a tremendous resource in helping citizens understand better the implications of a globally independent world. (p. 80)

Not only is there a need for additional instruction on international agriculture, but there is also an issue on how to best deliver such instruction. This issue is especially important while working with a far-flung clientele that cannot always take courses on campus. Flood and Conklin (2003) noted that “Teaching faculty is expected to use technologies with only rudimentary support, no incentives, and an inadequate awareness of how to incorporate technologies into instructional settings” (p. 75). The same researchers conducted a study which determined that more than 75% of the
faculty at The Ohio State College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences reported having essentially no support for technology-based teaching. An important issue for developing a distance-delivered international agriculture course is how to do so with minimal or no financial resources.

The current course being developed was the first-ever international course to be offered in a newly formed department. While there was a degree of expertise within the department on international agriculture and education, it was deemed best to thoroughly develop a course that was to be taught at the graduate level and to be delivered in a distance format.

The course would be required to meet the educational needs of a clientele primarily composed of Extension agents and agricultural education teachers. It would need to become part of a master’s degree program that could be entirely delivered via a distance-delivery mode. The course would need to be utilized by prospective students in numerous states, settings, and universities. In general, it had to go beyond any parochial thinking.

Of necessity, the course needed to be developed by educators with a broad background in international agriculture and education. There was a need for an innovative approach to the development of this new course and to use the assistance of numerous experts in the field.

**Course Development Process**

The following multi-step process was utilized to develop the international agriculture course. All off-campus correspondence was conducted using either the telephone or computer technology. All data and information were collected from November 2002 through February 2003. The multi-step process included:

1. An initial conversation among the two faculty members and an administrator with extensive international experience was held to develop a strategy for course development.
2. A five-member core for a task force was created. The core was composed of faculty members from other institutions who had expertise in international agriculture and were known and respected by the two departmental faculty members.
3. Each of the five core members were asked to name two additional members with international experience known and respected by them to serve on the task force. The additional 10 members gave a total of 15 for the task force. Members of the task force were located both domestically and internationally.
4. Each of the 15 members on the task force was asked to write a suggested purpose statement for the course.
5. The two departmental educators chose the best combination of words and statements from among the ones suggested and established one best statement of purpose.
6. The established purpose statement was shared with task force members who were asked to suggest specific topics for the course.
7. After establishing 78 non-duplicated possible topics for the course, the task force members were asked to rate each topic on a scale of 1 (definitely do not use) to 5 (definitely use).
8. Statistical means were determined and used to rank order each topic.
9. Broad course topics were determined by examination of specific topical means that were used either intact or by combining topics to make broader ones.
Educational Importance, Implications, and Applications

With a greater demand for instruction in international agriculture, it is more important than ever before to provide a course on the topic for interested clientele. With budgetary and time constraints, it is equally important to find an efficient manner in which to design such a course.

The system utilized in this study was very successful. Using technology to develop the course description and prioritize the content was very appropriate for establishing a distance-delivered course on international agriculture. It permitted the rapid turnaround time of experts on the subject from both a national and international pool of participants. It is also a system that is transportable and can be utilized by any college or agriculture department that wants to establish a similar course.

References


