Building a Comfort Zone: A Pedagogical Approach to International Field Study Seminars

John R. Vreyens, Ph.D.
IPFANS, University of Minnesota
135 Skok Hall
2003 Upper Buford Circle
St. Paul, MN 55108
612.624.3221
vreyens@umn.edu

Abstract

The College of Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences at the University of Minnesota historically had less than 5% of the undergraduate students graduating at the end of their bachelor degree programs with international experience. Since 1995, an effort was made to increase the participation of students in international learning opportunities. Over the past 14 years, the college has seen double digit annual increases in the number of students participating in international field study seminars. In 2008, 119 undergraduate students studied overseas.

The purpose of this poster is to explain how the college developed the framework for international field study seminars for undergraduate students. The process for identifying the key issues and concerns of students through a university-wide study, followed by a collegiate survey to determine those factors which impacted student participation in a program are presented. The framework is detailed with examples of how the various country programs have integrated the framework leading to the annual increase in student participation in short-term international learning experiences.

The results of the surveys found several factors as key point of decision for students: fear, financial implications, family and friends and length of the program. Based on these results, a framework for international field study seminars was created within the college. The key aspects integrated into the framework are: team building and pre-departure orientation; two-week programs offered at the end of the semester; international university partners assisting in the programmatic and logistical planning of the programs; and reflective journals and written, follow-up papers upon return to the USA.

Students are enthusiastic with these intense introductions to international study. A small percentage of students have enrolled in second program based on the first positive experience, in some cases participating in a longer program the second time.

The use of university partners has enhanced the interaction between those partners and the University of Minnesota leading to an expansion of international programs through increased faculty and student interaction.

The development of a pedagogically based framework is key to expansion of students in agricultural, life and natural resource sciences for cross-cultural competencies in the future. There is a skill set and mindset sought by employers not universally integrated into our curriculum within the land-grant system. As a result, other colleges seeking to integrate this same skill set for cross-cultural competencies of expand the mindset of students can use this process and framework to potentially begin to enhance their curriculum for students desiring an international career.