The Development and Implementation of Virtual International Agricultural Education Experiences

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Abstract

Internationalizing the curriculum for students at [Name] University is on the forefront of the list of goals for the university ([Name] University, 2008). A result of this goal has been the development of international cooperative agreements between [Name] University and Szent István University in Godollo, Hungary. As the largest agrarian university and the second largest technical oriented institute of higher education in the country (Szent István University, 2009), Szent István has much to offer [Name] University faculty and students. Further, the curriculum in this University includes a path that is designed to prepare students as secondary agricultural education teachers in Hungary much like the Agriscience Education program at [Name] University. Unfortunately, international travel presents multiple challenges for students. The cost of international travel prohibits many students from pursuing these valuable experiences. While a virtual experience could never replace an actual experience, a system has been developed to provide students with an opportunity to interact with international counterparts for a meaningful educational experience.

University agricultural education students were placed in small groups with Szent István Agricultural Education students to develop international agricultural education curriculum materials e.g. lesson plans, presentations, etc.. Both groups of students (U.S. and Hungarian) were enrolled in a teaching methodology course at their respective institutions. The initial organization of groups proceeded as follows: the 12 students in the U.S. class were divided into
four groups, a similar division was achieved in the Hungarian class. The U.S. groups contacted the small groups from within the corresponding Hungarian course. The students worked in international teams toward the development of an agriculture lesson plan (per team) and supporting materials with a focus on a sample of Hungarian and [State] agricultural products, commodities, services, etc. These lesson plans were developed to be employed later by agriculture teachers in [State] and in Hungary. As a part of the teaching methodologies courses, the students must "practice" their teaching in front of the class. The students were asked to present these international lessons to the group. The lessons were videotaped and placed on the internet for the international partners to view and critique. Over the course of the semester, the small groups communicated online via Axilior to develop the curriculum materials. In addition to facilitating the development of the partnership between the U.S. and Hungarian professors for this project, the Axilior Alliance provided the student groups with an interface through which the participants were allowed to chat, share documents for development and editing, post finished products, and provide feedback for the delivery of lessons.

While this method of providing international experiences to students virtually is a relatively new idea at [Name] University, it appears that it will be a productive means to expose students to other cultures and agricultural practices without the expense associated with international travel. It is the hopes of the organizers of this program that the students’ interests in international involvement will be piqued through this virtual experience and may lead to motivation to pursue authentic international opportunities.

**Keywords:** virtual international experience, internationalization of university curriculum, lesson plans