Viva Colaboración: Using Mentoring to Enhance International Agricultural Learning Programs

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Abstract

Increased learning, increased transfer of skills, enhanced communication, commitment, and motivation are all benefits of mentoring (Cooper & Miller, 1998). There are so many benefits to mentoring that the use of mentors has rapidly increased in popularity and is being implemented by multiple organizations (Cooper & Miller). A mentor is defined as an influential, established, knowledgeable member of an organization who supports and commits to the upward mobility of a protégé (Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998). A mentoring relationship is built to assist both the mentor and the protégé. The relationship gives the mentor an opportunity to use his/her knowledge and expertise to assist the personal and professional development of someone else. For the protégé, mentoring is an opportunity to learn from someone with more experience and knowledge.

The purpose of this study was to identify the aspects of mentoring that U.S. and international partners felt enhanced learning in an international environment. Specifically, the study examined the following characteristics of a mentoring relationship: the mentoring relationship itself, intercultural communication, intercultural friendship, the use of mentors in teaching about cultural perspectives, and how mentoring increased multicultural awareness during an international agricultural learning program.

This poster will show how U.S. participants felt about being mentored by an international partner while participating in an agricultural learning program overseas. Seventeen participants, the protégés, were engaged in a three week long international agricultural learning USDA grant funded program in Costa Rica which included educational sessions/lectures and hands on learning through research projects. Research application groups were also formed where U.S. protégés engaged with Latin American mentors to solve an agricultural sustainability issue identified on a local Costa Rican farm.

At the conclusion of the program, both the protégés and the mentors completed a five item survey on the level of importance they associated with the characteristics of the mentoring relationship mentioned above. Item scales ranged from 1 = no importance to 5 = great importance. Importance of mentoring index scale reliability was calculated at α = .92. The
Overall importance ratings of all five items were combined to create an importance of mentoring index for the protégés \((M = 4.31, SD = 0.77)\) and the mentors \((M = 4.53, SD = .23)\). Most specifically, the protégés felt having an international mentor was of great importance \((M = 4.12, SD = 1.05)\). The mentors felt serving as a mentor was of great importance \((M = 4.33, SD = .58)\). Both protégés and mentors felt the mentoring relationship contributed to the agricultural learning program.

As shown in this study, the development of mentoring relationships in an international environment may increase international engagement and learning. Both domestic and international partners stand to benefit from mentoring. Domestic benefits may include an increase in intercultural communication, enhanced learning experiences, increased information retention, and an enhancement in multicultural awareness (Cooper & Miller, 1998). International partners will benefit by being able to use their knowledge and expertise to further expand their own professional network and improve personal multicultural communication (Cooper & Miller). With such strong potential benefits for both domestic and international programs, it is important for international agricultural and extension educators to consider developing mentoring relationships as part of international learning programs.

**Keywords:** international experience, extension agents, mentoring, teamwork