Benefits and Barriers: Faculty International Professional Development

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Abstract
The salience of international experiences within today’s education is obvious and apparent. International experiences can help prepare students to live and work in an increasingly global society (NASULGC, 2004). It has been found that faculty members who themselves participate in international exchanges are much more likely to incorporate similar experiences into their curriculum. The focus of this study was to examine faculty development as a result of participation in the National Security Education Program (NSEP) in Russia and/or Ukraine. The objectives of the study were twofold: 1) to explain the faculty professional growth that occurred during or as a direct result of participation in the program, and 2) to identify the barriers that prevent or hinder faculty participation in this and similar programs. In-depth interviews with former NSEP participants confirmed researcher hypotheses. Professional growth of participating faculty included improved teaching techniques, increased integration of international examples, and a heightened global perspective. Faculty-perceived student benefits included a more diverse viewpoint on world events, improved interpersonal interactions, and increased post-graduation employability. Barriers focused around cost or resources required and time commitment. In conclusion, international faculty experiences have enormous potential for both faculty development, and the development of students with whom they interact.

Keywords: Faculty development, internationalization, qualitative, study abroad programs
Introduction

“At its core, internationalization is the critical means whereby the quality of our academic learning, discovery, and engagement can be enhanced, broadened, and enlivened. When we integrate international perspectives, experience, and discovery into our institutions, it expands our capacity to address the challenges of the new century and the needs of the world. It enables us to better serve our students, our communities, our nation, and the academy.”

--National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (2004, p. 7)

Today’s college graduates need to be prepared to begin careers in an increasingly global society. Intercultural interaction, global market exchanges, and ever-increasing diversity are hallmarks of the world into which they will enter. As such, students should graduate equipped to thrive in this continually growing and culturally diverse society.

International experiences can help prepare undergraduate students to live and work in an increasingly global society (NASULGC, 2004). Zhai and Sheer (2002) found that students of agricultural colleges can build confidence, increased awareness of global cultures, and improved interpersonal interactions as a result of participation in study abroad programs. Cultural knowledge, information about the geographic region of study, and communications skills have also been identified as benefits from student participation in international learning opportunities (Bruening & Carey, 2003). These skills have the potential to prepare students to be successful participants in the international agricultural marketplace.

Unfortunately, however, in 2004-2005 only 1.4 percent of U.S. students studying abroad were from colleges of agriculture (IIE, 2006). As such, the vast majority of students currently attending colleges of agriculture will only experience a curriculum as international as that provided by their home institutions.

Faculty members are instrumental in the internationalization of curriculum, as well as in providing input towards the internationalization of an institution’s vision and research efforts (NASULGC, 2004). Bull (1996) found that faculty members who have participated in international travel or research indicated more internationalization in the courses they teach than faculty without international experience. It has also been proposed that faculty experience abroad will enrich their cultural sensitivity and understanding (Fung & Filippo, 2002). As evidenced, faculty participation in study abroad programming has enormous potential for both faculty development and the development of students with whom they interact.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine faculty development as a result of participation in a National Security Education Program (NSEP) in Russia and/or Ukraine. The objectives of the study were twofold: 1) to explain the faculty professional growth that occurred during or as a direct result of participation in the program and 2) to identify the barriers that prevent or hinder faculty participation in this and similar programs.

NSEP Background Information

The National Security Education Program (NSEP) provides funding for study of critical needs languages and other areas pertinent to national security (NSEPNET, 2006), including
engineering, science, agriculture and food production, etc. (Boren, 2006). The NSEP was federally established to assist in fulfilling the mission of National Security Education Act (NSEA): “to lead in developing the national capacity to educate United States citizens to: understand foreign cultures, strengthen U.S. economic competitiveness, [and] enhance international cooperation and security” (NSEPNET, 2006, para. 1).

The focus of the Russia/Ukraine NSEP regarding Russian/Ukrainian agricultural development and the Russian/Ukrainian language fit nicely with the NSEA mission. As a result, a 1999 NSEP grant of $420,000.00 was awarded to assist in funding the Russia/Ukraine program. The grant paid primarily for student pre-departure expenses and preparation. “It paid for travel scholarships and visa expenses of students. [The] grant also paid for development of the online [Russian culture] courses and… [initial] language instruction” that U.S. students took part in prior to departure (Chumakov, Bruening, Frick, Friedel, & Moreno, 2006, p. 9).

Between 1999 and 2005, 18 faculty members from six U.S. 1862 land-grant universities participated in the NSEP Program in Russia and/or Ukraine. This program was designed specifically to enhance the language, cultural, and technical agriculture skills of students and faculty who participated.

Faculty members took part in the program by teaching courses in Russia at the Moscow State Agro Engineering University and/or in Ukraine at Lviv State Agricultural University. Typically, participating faculty members lived in Moscow or Lviv for a one-month period. During that time they taught a three-credit course in two eight-hour days per week (45 total hours). Other weekdays were spent in group agricultural tours designed to help “better understand the transformation of centrally controlled agriculture to the free market system in the Moscow region” (Chumakov et. al., 2006, p. 8) or touring the host city and preparing their lessons.

Student attendance in faculty courses included American students studying abroad from participating NSEP program universities, as well as competitively selected students from the host universities in either Moscow or Lviv. In addition to the area tours and lesson preparation in which faculty participated during free time, they were also encouraged to spend time interacting with the local and American students enrolled in their courses.

Methods and Data Sources
For the purpose of this study, 12 of the 18 faculty who took part in the NSEP agreed to participate in interviews either face-to-face or via telephone. They were interviewed during the spring semester of 2004. Because each faculty member participated in NSEP in different years, the interviews were conducted at differing intervals following their participation (some only a few months post-participation, while others up to six years post-participation). In the interviews faculty members were asked to respond to a series of six open-ended questions. These questions were designed to discover their perceptions of the personal results, benefits, and difficulties associated with participation in the program. Questions included the following:

1. How has participation in the NSEP impacted your teaching in the U.S.?
2. Why should undergraduate students participate in these types of programs?
3. What are the barriers that keep students and professors from participating in programs like this?
4. What can be done to improve the faculty experience in the program?
5. What recommendations would you make regarding this program to other university teachers?
6. In what way has this international experience changed your life?

Interviews were then recorded and transcribed word-for-word. The analysis ensues.

**Results**

Overall, respondents were very positive about the program. This overarching sentiment was expressed consistently in responses to each interview question.

**Benefits: Perceived professional development of faculty**

*Impact on teaching.* When asked how participation in NSEP impacted their teaching, faculty responded with several examples of improved teaching techniques utilized since their return from Russia/Ukraine. The primary benefit to which faculty members referred was an increased ability to integrate international examples into the courses they are teaching at home. Ten of the twelve faculty members explicitly noted this benefit. In addition, five faculty members indicated an overall increase in their global perspective; a phenomenon that many of them noted also affects their perspective on the subject matter they teach. Two faculty members went on to equate this global experience with a higher credibility level in teaching their subject matter. In addition, two faculty members noted that working with the Russian/Ukrainian students has helped them to refine their teaching techniques to meet the needs of various learning styles. One respondent characterized the benefit that his more internationalized teaching techniques have had on his students at home by stating that “through [his] eyes [students] can actually participate in this kind of activity without necessarily being there.”

*Faculty perceived value of undergraduate participation.* After participation in the NSEP, faculty expressed strong support for undergraduate participation in similar exchange programs. Benefits they noted included students that possessed a more diverse viewpoint on day-to-day problems and world events, personal growth through removal from their comfort zones, increased post-graduation employability because of this unique experience during undergraduate career, a greater appreciation for other cultures, preparation for students to participate in a global economy, and improved interpersonal interactions with others.

*Life changing experience.* Many of the faculty members identified program participation as a major life-changing event. One particular change mentioned by six of the twelve faculty members was an increased awareness and concern for other cultures and countries, in particular Russia/Ukraine. Even more faculty members identified the experience as having changed the way they teach and interact with students. Respondents also noted that NSEP participation helped them to develop professionally, encouraging further participation in international research and similar faculty exchange programs.

*Improving the faculty experience.* Suggestions were also made regarding how to further improve the faculty experience while abroad with the NSEP. One of the most frequently mentioned suggestions was for faculty to receive detailed information about the host culture and teaching experience prior to departure from the U.S. Many of the faculty who recommended this change also suggested that this pre-departure information could be ascertained through interaction with past faculty participants who could share advice, provide tips, and give insight into what the experience would entail. The second frequently made suggestion was to have the program do a better job of utilizing faculty downtime while in the host country. Many faculty
members cited a desire to interact more with faculty of the host institution through workshops, seminars, research projects, and other experiences.

*Recommending the program to others.* Additionally, faculty participants were asked what recommendations regarding the program they would make to other university teachers. Participants enthusiastically recommended that others participate in the NSEP, with taking the opportunity to learn about the Russian/Ukrainian culture and environment (prior to departure) being the first step. They also recommended that future participants work hard to prepare their course materials prior to arrival at the host institution. However, flexibility was also recommended, as once participants arrive at the host institution they may need to adapt or change their plans to meet the needs of situations that arise.

**Barriers: Suggestions to enhance NSEP participation**

Faculty perceived barriers to faculty participation in similar programs were also outlined. These included the cost or resources required for program participation, as well as fear or uncertainty of the unknown situation. Another major barrier was the time required to travel and participate in the program. For many faculty members being away from home and family commitments for a lengthy period of time is difficult. Additionally, respondents expressed difficulty in leaving university commitments, which may include research, leadership posts, graduate advisement, etc. Finally, respondents expressed a lack of university, peer, and administrative support for faculty participation in international experiences as a potential difficulty. Respondents perceive that the intensely research-based reward structure present in some universities does not reward faculty for international teaching experiences.

**Educational Implications**

International teaching and research programs hold enormous potential for faculty professional and personal development. Faculty who participate not only change their outlook and perspectives on the world, but on their career appointments as well. As a result, the benefits of faculty participation in the NSEP holds positive implications for universities with participating faculty in research and teaching appointments. Programs such as the NSEP aid in the internationalization of curriculum taught by participating faculty upon return to their home institutions. In addition, participants frequently examine and revise their teaching methodology, interaction with students, and research in lieu of their international experiences. Through the self-perceived professional development experienced through the NSEP, participating faculty are becoming equipped and motivated to help internationalize their home institutions.

Improvements could be made to the program to further enhance faculty development in the area of professional knowledge exchange with faculty of the host institution. While much of the program’s free time was designed for faculty to interact with students and grow in their intercultural relationships, participating faculty would like to have further opportunities for interaction with faculty at the host institution. In particular, interaction with host faculty could be accomplished through workshops, shared course teaching responsibilities, collaborative research, and formalized knowledge exchange.

Although many barriers to program participation exist, they do not outweigh program benefits as expressed by participants. Many of the barriers identified by the group, such as family and university commitments, as well as a non-supportive university structure were consistent with past research findings (Viers, 2003). In order to make participation in the NSEP a more viable option to faculty in U.S. universities, university administrators should set up mechanisms
to compensate and easily allow for time away from commitments. In addition, faculty who see value in their own participation should seek out the input of previous program participants, gather advice, and plan in advance to prevent barriers from affecting participation.

References
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