

**Internationalizing Extension:  
Benefits and Impact among Faculty, Students and Stakeholders**

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**Abstract**

*An impact assessment was conducted to determine the benefit and change resulting from an innovative internationalizing extension training program (IETP). The program consisted of two introductory sessions, a ten-day onsite learning experience in Costa Rica and a follow-up reflection and planning session. Program participants included four Extension Agents, four county commissioners, four graduate students, one state Extension specialist, and two program coordinators. The purpose of this study was to determine the nature and magnitude of the professional and personal impact among Extension faculty, graduate students, and county commissioners that resulted from their participation in the Internationalizing Extension Training Program. In addition, other specific objectives were to determine how participants have incorporated the experience into their work, and; to determine aspirations and intentions related to internationalizing extension. In general, participants found the experience to enhance their world view and influenced many of them to stay internationally engaged at some level. Commissioners also commented that by participating in the IETP, they realized the impact that Extension has in Florida and the United States. As a result, they have supported increased funding for local Extension and its services. Graduate students gained an understanding of ways to implement international components into their future careers and the importance of international professional involvement. Participants felt strongly that the IETP was very valuable as Extension continues to change and adapt to the needs of local citizens, respond to the changing state demographics, and be a part of the national participation in international affairs.*

## **Introduction**

As a result of a grant opportunity, University of Florida Extension developed an innovative Internationalizing Extension Training Project (IETP) that focused on capacity and institution building among three important partners: county extension agents, locally elected county commissioners and students and faculty of educational departments in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALs). The IETP professional development project was unique in that it brought representatives of local government, teaching faculty and graduate students together with county extension faculty to explore international extension possibilities in a collaborative manner. Participants were selected from those who applied, and selection was based upon interest in internationalizing Extension and commitment to full participation in all aspects of the program.

The IETP project consisted of four face-to-face sessions for the participants. There were two introductory sessions held at the University of Florida. The first session held in December 2003 was geared toward learning about the program, teambuilding, understanding Extension and internationalizing Extension. Session two, held in January 2004, focused upon understanding Costa Rica, EARTH University, Costa Rican Extension and preparing for the on-site visit. The ten-day onsite visit (March) was designed to expose participants to multiple aspects of Costa Rican people, Extension, local government and EARTH University. A final wrap-up session was held in April for participants to reflect upon their experiences with the program and to develop plans as to how they would utilize this experience. This study was conducted in October 2004 as a summative evaluation as an impact study of the overall program.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Cooperative Extension professionals have opportunities to actively participate in multiple international extension efforts. As a result of their close working relationship with local clientele, it is critical that extension agents are involved in international projects, exchanges or hosting foreign visitors in order that they have an international dimension and/or recognition in their work. As such, a number of international projects have included county Extension staff as well as state staff. These efforts have served to increase international awareness, understanding and involvement among extension professionals and others (Place et. al., 2000; Ludwig, 1999; Williams and Brewer, 2000).

An integral part of extension international involvement that has received attention is the personal and professional impact that is attained through such efforts. Unfortunately, there are few studies that have focused on assessing this type of impact. It is more common to find research that evaluates the benefit to the recipients of international endeavors. But an aspect that is often overlooked is the impact that occurs among those from donor countries who participate in international projects. In order to fully authenticate all aspects of change from international programs, it is imperative that all benefits and change is documented.

Studies have established that positive effects occur among extension faculty from their actual participation in an international endeavor. These professionals have experienced increased international awareness and understanding, incorporation of international components into extension programming, and improved self-esteem applicable into their extension career. Moreover, stakeholders and near-associates have experienced various levels of benefit (Place et. al., 2000; Williams and Brewer, 2000). These studies have shown that professionals become reinvigorated about their extension careers and grassroots involvement

in extension education. Moreover, they are more committed to the original ideals and purposes of extension.

Internationalizing extension has been identified as a national initiative for USDA-CSREES, and the University of Florida IFAS Extension embraced this issue. Research has shown that the public's fundamental attitudes about international involvement is favorable and aligns with broad interpersonal relationships, such as those with family and community members (Place et al, 2000; Williams & Brewer, 2000). Currently, there is a lack of data that documents the impact of internationalizing extension – organizationally and beyond, and this study was designed to capture this type of impact.

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to determine the nature and magnitude of the professional and personal impact among Extension faculty, graduate students, and county commissioners that resulted from their participation in the Internationalizing Extension Training Program. The specific objectives of the study were: to determine factors related to personal and professional impact among project participants; to determine how participants have incorporated the experience into their work, and; to determine aspirations and intentions related to internationalizing extension.

### **Methods**

A questionnaire was adapted from one used in previous research (Place, 2002) to specifically address the study objectives. The revised instrument was reviewed by an expert panel of faculty and graduate students in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication at the University of Florida. Minor changes in wording and formatting were incorporated into the instrument to address content and face validity. The questionnaire consisted of the following major sections: work and living environment; perceptions about the international experience; respondent and community characteristics; characteristics of the U.S. Extension unit and community; the role as a participant.; the US Extension climate towards internationalization; output and visibility from the project; and future intentions as a result of the project. Most responses were based on a 5-pt. or an 11 pt. Likert-scale from which Means were generated that represented the participants' perspectives of the impact of the IETP. In order to provide the opportunity for the respondents to elaborate, the survey contained open-ended questions that provided qualitative data as well. The qualitative responses were used to clarify the quantitative findings and they are reported together in the results section.

The population for this study consisted of all program participants – other than the authors of this study. This consisted of four county commissioners, four Extension agents, three graduate students and one state Extension specialist. This impact study commenced six months after the completion of the reflection session in order to ensure adequate time for potential impact to occur from program participation.

Survey methodologies as recommended by Dillman (2000) were utilized for the study. A pre-notification postcard was sent five days prior to sending the questionnaire and an introductory letter to all participants. Two waves of follow-up were conducted within six weeks to ensure complete participation. Completed questionnaires were received from all participants.

## **Results and Conclusions**

The results of this study have revealed a number of interesting and compelling findings across the group of extension faculty, students and county commissioners who were involved. Results are reported by objective.

### *Objective One*

#### **Respondent & Community Characteristics**

Objective one sought to determine factors related to personal and professional impact among participants. In order to measure change, some baseline demographic data and information regarding the participants' prior international experience and attitudes regarding global issues, extension, and internationalizing Extension were ascertained.

All of the graduate students who participated in the program were female, two of which were Doctoral students and one a Master's student (in Agricultural Communications, the Doctor of Plant Medicine program, and Environmental Management, respectively) at the University of Florida. According to the graduate students, the differences in the nature of community awareness of global issues in the communities with which they interacted ranged from citizens being very open and aware of the potential of global interdependence to being very closed and concerned about global competition. The state Extension specialist (horticulture) was from a mixed (urban/rural) community that he perceived to be somewhat identified with ethnic backgrounds and also somewhat aware of the potential of global interdependence.

Two of the extension faculty worked in rural communities while two considered the communities in which they worked to be urban. The heritage of these communities was found to be quite diverse, ranging from being not-at-all, to very much identified with ethnic backgrounds. Responses indicated that the nature of community awareness of global issues was relatively conservative, with citizens being either neutral or only somewhat open and aware of the potentials of global interdependence. Half of the extension faculty was female while the other two were male. Two of the faculty were county extension directors, in the areas of agriculture and family and consumer sciences (FCS). The other two faculty consisted of a FCS and an Environmental Horticulture agent.

The county commissioners who participated in the program were all male, two from rural communities, one from an urban setting, and another from what he considered a mixed (urban/rural) community. The commissioners work mostly in economic development with responsibilities also in urban development, community development, land use planning, and natural resources and the environment. All four commissioners reported that the local communities in which they work are at least slightly, and at most, very much identified with ethnic backgrounds; again, demonstrating the diversity of backgrounds of the program participants. The commissioners responded conservatively that they perceived their constituents to be either very closed and concerned about global competition and at the most, only somewhat open and aware of the potentials of global interdependence.

#### **International Experience**

Participants were asked about their experiences and attitudes regarding their international involvement prior to participating in the IETP by indicating the extent to which they had been involved in experiences (listed in the survey) via a 5pt. Likert-scale: 1= none, and 5=extensive. Among the interesting findings, participants showed high interests in international activities and in developing foreign language skills, but had little experience in

traveling with or chaperoning extension groups abroad. They also reported that the degree to which an international perspective was included in extension programming was very low. As a result of their participation in the IETP, responses showed a significant positive change in participants' perspectives; of U.S. Extension and their attitudes about Costa Rica as a nation (Table 1). They also developed new perspectives on Extension's role in international development and gained an increased interest in international activities. However, no significant change was reported in their attitudes about America and Americans. The program had a very positive influence on the participants' perceptions of the Extension organization, their relationships with clientele, constituents, and departments or colleagues (for agents, commissioners, and students, respectively), and their relationships with their local community (Table 2).

When asked if they would apply to participate in another international program, given the opportunity, 64% of the participants said "definitely." In fact, 92% of the participants said that they would "definitely" recommend participating in an international program to their colleagues or to others with whom they work. The mean rating of the overall satisfaction with the IETP was an eight out of a 11-point scale (0 = very dissatisfied and 10 = very satisfied). Reasons for this were captured as participants answered questions in response to their role in the program.

### **Role as a Participant**

Participants also perceived that their county offices or academic department had very positive attitudes toward their involvement in the program, viewing the experience as important, especially in enhancing the participant's professional development and bringing value to the whole organization or department. Participants perceived their home office or department to have pride in their being selected for the experience and viewed it as a career enhancing opportunity for them as well. A lower mean score (3.17 of a 5-point Likert-scale) indicated that there was relatively little concern about potential political impacts resulting from the participant's involvement in the program. Participants identified "extremely good support from IFAS administration," and "encouragement of personal and career growth activities" as a couple of examples that impacted their participation in the project.

Respondents indicated that their immediate supervisors responded very positively to their involvement in the IETP, and participants described them in such phrases as "very positive and very involved in international affairs," "very supportive and encouraging." Commissioners also reported that they received positive feedback from their constituents, for example, "Many constituents have a very good attitude; county extension and international extension work together for a better world." Participants indicated they received very little to no negative attitudes regarding their involvement in the IETP from supervisors, peers and colleagues, clientele, and local extension supporters (1.36 to 1.67 on overall mean out of a 5-point Likert-scale).

Most participants recommended that rather than the existence of an ideal time in one's career to participate in an international assignment, this type of involvement should be promoted often, regularly and anytime. Many participants recognized that people are able to make different types of contributions to the experience and benefit differently based on where they are in their careers at the time.

TABLE 2. Extent of Change Perceptions of Participants from the IETP. San Antonio, TX

Areas Changed due to the Influence of the IETP	Mean Participant Perceptions*				
	Graduate Students (n=3)	Extension Faculty (n=4)	County Commissioners (n=4)	Specialist Responses (n=1)	Overall - All Participants (n=12)
Developed New Knowledge or Technical Information	3.67	3.75	3.50	2.00	3.50
Developed Skills of Working with People	4.00	3.50	4.50	4.00	4.00
Changed Attitudes about Latin American Citizens	3.67	3.50	4.50	4.00	3.80
Changed Attitudes about Costa Rica as a Nation	3.33	4.50	4.33	4.00	4.09
Changed Attitudes about America and Americans	2.67	2.75	2.67	5.00	2.88
Developed a New Perspective on Extension's Role in International Development	4.33	4.50	4.67	5.00	4.55
Your Perspective on U.S. Extension	4.67	3.50	4.50	5.00	4.25
Increased Interest in International Activities	4.33	3.75	4.50	5.00	4.25
Perception of Self	4.00	3.00	2.50	3.00	3.08

\* Responses corresponded to a 5-pt. Likert-scale ( 1 = None, 3 = Moderate, to 5 = Extensive).

Table 2. Extent of Influence of Participating in the IETP on Work-Related Aspects.

Work-Related Aspects Subject to Influence	Mean Participant Perceptions*				
	Graduate Students (n=3)	Extension Faculty (n=4)	County Commissioners (n=4)	State Specialist (n=1)	Overall - All Participants (n=12)
Knowledge of Career Opportunities Within Extension	4.33	3.00	4.00	4.00	3.75
Perception of the Extension Organization	4.67	4.00	4.75	3.00	4.33
Relationships with their Clientele, Constituents, Departments, or Colleagues	4.00	4.00	4.50	3.00	4.08
Relationships with their Local Community	3.33	3.75	5.00	4.00	4.08
Position or Involvement in Professional Organizations	4.00	3.00	3.75	3.00	3.50

\* Responses corresponded to a 5-pt. Likert-scale ( 1 = None, 3 = Moderate, to 5 = Extensive).

### **U.S. Extension Climate toward Internationalization**

Participants felt strongly that the state extension organization should provide support for campus and field staff to participate in international exchanges and cooperation and to clarify public awareness of the university's role in international programs and potential impacts on the state (Table 3). Most extension faculty described the number of internationally oriented programs, and the number of youth involved in international exchanges or tours to be few to none. The majority of extension faculty reported that there was no international dimension mentioned in their unit's plans of work, and that there was no evidence of announcements or reports of international activities. Extension faculty responses varied greatly and ranged from "none" to "many" when reporting instances of the following: staff development activities and resources available for international interests; involvement of foreign students/guests in the unit's professional activities; involvement of adult clientele on international exchanges or tours; and hosting of international visitors.

### **Overall Professional and Personal Impact**

An 11-pt. scale (0 = no impact, 10 = extensive impact) was utilized as a way for respondents to indicate the strength of the overall impact the IETP had on them both professionally and personally. The mean rating for both "professional impact" and "personal impact" given by participants was 8.0, indicating that the IETP had a very significant impact on the extension faculty (8.0), graduate students (9.0), and county commissioners (7.5) involved in the experience. Involvement in the IETP caused specific benefit and impact that is outlined below.

### **Indicators of Professional Impact**

In terms of professional impact, extension faculty named an increased ability to relate to Hispanic audiences and promote international awareness; a greater understanding of the necessity to continue to work locally *and* internationally to solve issues that impact the world; and a greater appreciation for the needs of third world countries. One faculty member stated, "I have always wanted to work internationally but this experience gave me a reality check. It did not dissuade me from my goal, only made me realize how much more is involved in really being internationally engaged versus being a tourist." County commissioners commented on the relevance of understanding the Hispanic culture better in order to better relate to our own large Hispanic population in Florida. As this relates to extension, the commissioners noted how important an experience like this is to Extension agents to enable them to reach out to and provide educational programs to Hispanic clientele. Commissioners also commented that the experience provided a realization of the impact that extension has in Florida and the United States; as a result, they report that they are more willing to provide funding and lobby other commissioners to vote for funding. Commissioners also expressed an interest in maintaining stronger contact with EARTH University in Costa Rica. Graduate students expressed a better understanding and appreciation for the role of nonformal education, and especially the U.S. Land-Grant System. Students commented that they made "good contacts within Florida's Extension system and gained an understanding of how to implement international components into [their] future career[s]."

**TABLE 2005** Perceptions Regarding the Effectiveness of the Extension Organization and Priority Support for International Activities of Campus and Field Staff.

International Activities	Mean Participant Perceptions*				
	Graduate Students (n=3)	Extension Faculty (n=4)	County Commissioners (n=4)	State Specialist (n=1)	Overall - All Participants (n=12)
Prepare themselves for Work in Developing Countries	4.00	3.25	4.33	5.00	3.91
Incorporate International Dimensions into Regular Extension Programming	3.67	3.75	4.67	4.00	4.00
Clarify Public Awareness of the University's Role in International Programs and Potential Impacts on the State	4.33	4.50	4.67	5.00	4.55
Participate in International Exchanges and Cooperation	4.67	4.50	4.67	5.00	4.64

\* Responses corresponded to a 5-pt. Likert-scale ( 1 = Not at all, 3 = Moderate, to 5 = Very Much).

One graduate student, who is now a faculty member at a Land-Grant University, now understands the need for an international perspective and is taking steps to provide international opportunities for students that she works with. The participants in general, expressed that they now possess a more global perspective in their life and work, will look for future opportunities to become internationally involved, and realize the need to continue learning.

### Indicators of Personal Impact

Many of the professional and personal impacts the participants perceived overlapped. Some further comments regarding the impact of the IETP on participants personally were that it “caused [them] to reflect on [their] communication skills and priorities in life;” and “gave [them] a keener awareness of how people in general, are more alike than different.” Moreover, one participant stated that international experiences such as this “provide an opportunity to learn more about the variety of cultures of the world and the need for all to respect and admire the values and morays of others.” As a result of the experience, one commissioner and two partners purchased land in the “host community” where participants stayed overnight during their time in Costa Rica. The land is now designated for community development activities and while constructing plans for various activities, the U.S. property owner and Costa Rican neighbors have developed strong friendships. In general, participants found the experience to be “gratifying” and “very rewarding”, “dramatically enhancing [their] world view” and influencing many of them to stay internationally engaged at some level.

*Objective Two*

Objective two sought to determine how participants have incorporated the experience in their work. According to the survey responses, participants indicated that they conducted presentations to clientele, students, or community groups and disseminated media communications that integrated aspects learned participation in the IETP in 6-10 instances, on average. Participants also indicated that since their participation in the program, many of them have designed or modified educational programs to incorporate a global perspective; counseled individuals about international awareness; shared materials or resources about international programs with others; provided input based on their experience into professional development activities; conducted presentations at professional association conferences; supported community groups with international interests; and created or maintained linkages with contacts in Costa Rica.

It is impressive to note the number of presentations that have been made to others regarding the IETP. Three individuals have made over 16 presentations, three others made from six to fifteen, and everyone else made less than five. By using the mean number of presentations per person, it was conservatively calculated that over 100 presentations had been made by these twelve people in six months. Similarly, over 53 others have been personally counseled on international issues. Such high levels of communication and interaction with others documents how the IETP has caused students, extension agents and county commissioners to take a personal interest in telling others about international opportunities and issues.

Participants mentioned that the experience enhanced their credibility with others, helped them to become involved in other international projects, and gave them new enthusiasm for travel that they hope to convey to co-workers, students and colleagues. This reinvigoration served as a stimulus for participants to become proactive with their communication channels with colleagues and constituents.

Participants also mentioned that they have “incorporated cultural learning experiences into training for youth and adult audiences,” and “received positive responses from Latin Americans because of [their] interest in understanding their culture and specific issues. This first-hand experience has helped to build credibility and interaction with clientele that are sometimes underrepresented in extension programs. County commissioners believe that their “constituents have benefited through [their] increased understanding of Hispanic issues and extension.” As a result, these local government officials have been able to better address some of the issues they face with minorities in their own counties, so that they are more responsive. Moreover, because of a greater understanding and appreciation for Extension, some commissioners have increased funding for local Extension and its many services.

*Objective Three*

Objective three was to determine aspirations and intentions related to internationalizing Extension as noted in Table 4. Participants felt that some changes in extension leadership should be made in order to expand the impact on Americans’ participation in international extension educational efforts.

TABLE 4. 2005 Commendable Practices and Impact on Internationalization Efforts.

Leadership Practices Suggested for Greater Impact	Mean Participant Perceptions*				
	Graduate Students (n=3)	Extension Faculty (n=4)	County Commissioners (n=4)	State Specialist (n=1)	Overall - All Participants (n=12)
Administrative Support for International Education	4.67	4.75	4.25	5.00	4.48
Leadership for International Education	3.33	4.25	4.25	4.00	4.00
Identification of International Opportunities for Administration, Staff, Faculty, and Clientele	4.67	4.50	4.50	5.00	4.58
Orientation to International Assignments	3.67	4.25	4.50	3.00	4.08
Reward Structure for International Education Participation (merit adjustment, tenure, promotion, peer recognition)	4.00	4.25	3.25	5.00	3.92
Financial Support for Participation	5.00	4.75	3.75	5.00	4.50
Policies and Procedures to Facilitate Participation in International Efforts	4.00	4.75	4.75	4.00	4.50
Committee for Internationalization Efforts	2.33	2.75	4.00	3.00	3.08
Organizational Culture that Expects Int'l Activity	4.67	2.50	4.75	3.00	3.83
Programs on Internationalization for Clientele	4.67	3.25	4.25	4.00	4.00
Cultural Interactions between Staff and Scholars of other Countries	4.33	3.00	4.50	5.00	4.00
Exchange Programs Institutionalized	4.00	3.00	4.75	3.00	3.83
Staff Development Opportunities	3.33	3.25	4.50	4.00	3.75

\* Responses corresponded to a 5-pt. Likert-scale (1 = Not important, 3 = Somewhat Important, to 5 = Very Important)

The most salient responses, related to changes needed, included: stressing the importance for U.S. citizens and organizations to be internationally involved; providing strong administrative support for international education; identifying international opportunities for administration, staff, faculty and clientele; and providing financial support for participation (Table 4). Participation in the IETP solidified how strongly these people felt that Extension needs to have an international component and take a proactive stance to ensure adequate involvement. Most notable was the very high rating given for many of these factors. Extension administration needs to provide adequate support, resources and otherwise, along with identifying opportunities for people to get involved with. Taking an active approach as an organization would get various professional staff involved as well as constituents thereby leading to truly internationalizing Extension.

Many of the activities that participants are currently involved in as a result of their participation in the IETP have been mentioned previously. Others include: participants taking international sabbaticals; continued communication and commencement of joint projects with EARTH University; reaching out to international students on a regular basis along with hosting exchange students; encouraging other faculty to apply for international sabbaticals; working on a joint pest management project with Puerto Rico; and sponsoring a student from EARTH University to do an internship in Florida. One participant seemed to capture the sentiment of the group that participated in the IETP in the following words “[the program] is very valuable as extension continues to change and adapt to the needs of local citizens, respond to the changing state demographics, and be a part of the national participation in international affairs.”

### **Educational importance, implications, and application**

Positive change has been noted in attitudes about internationalizing extension, relationships with colleagues and stakeholders, and about future interest in international activities. Participants felt that they were able to gain personally and professionally from this comprehensive program. Moreover, they looked very favorably upon future participation in international projects as they could see the value and purpose in such activities. In fact, a number of them may actively pursue other opportunities as they arise.

Participants have noted many different ways in which they have extended this experience with others through presentations with colleagues and community groups, workshops, conferences and integration into ongoing programs. The IETP was a program that people got excited about, and as a result they wanted to tell others. Many people beyond the actual participants were affected by this program through the multiplier affect that Extension has embodied during its existence. Because of this, and extension’s grassroots presence, it is well-situated to conduct a myriad of locally-based nonformal educational programs. As a result, local constituents will have the opportunity to better understand international issues and how it affects each of us locally.

This study has revealed the importance of international involvement for enhancing global knowledge and understanding, and subsequently, the impact among extension professionals, graduate students and local government officials. Those who have an opportunity to have an active learning experience in another country not only contribute to their own personal and professional development, but they also contribute numerous spill-over benefits back in their home unit. Globally competent extension professionals, students and local officials that are committed to extension and its overarching mission result from effective international programs.

Furthermore, the IETP was enhanced by including partners of extension, demonstrating the importance of involving extension agents, local officials, and graduate students. The personal contact over an extended period of time in the US as well as another country, brought about multiple strong bonds. They were able to learn from one another by gaining a much greater appreciation for values, beliefs, roles and responsibilities.

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