

INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE: PATHWAYS TO PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

Nick T. Place¹, Steven G. Jacob², Mary P. Andrews³, Nancy E. Crago⁴

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication
Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, 219 Rolfs Hall, University of Florida
P.O. Box 110540
Gainesville, FL 32611-0540
Phone: 352-392-0502 Fax: 352-392-9585
E-mail: nplace@gnv.ifas.ufl.edu

²Assistant Professor, Department of Family, Youth, and Community Sciences
Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida

³Associate Professor; Director, International Extension Programs
Department of Family and Child Ecology, Michigan State University

⁴CFCS, Penn State Cooperative Extension
The Pennsylvania State University

Abstract

A study was conducted to determine factors that lead to greatest impact among individuals and near-associates from an International Extension project. The project focused on the participants of the Polish-American Extension Project (PAEP). Data was derived from a 19-page questionnaire that was completed by over 95% of the participants. The purpose of this study was to determine the specific components of international involvement that lead to personal and professional impact among Extension professionals and near-associates. Like variables were grouped and summated to create variable blocks for analysis. Items that were not indexed were used as individual variables. These indexed and individual variables were correlated with three dependent variables: the extent of personal and professional impact on PAEP participants, extent of impact on immediate and extended family members of PAEP participants, and extent of impact on colleagues and clientele of PAEP participants.

This study has revealed the importance of international involvement for enhancing global impact among Extension professionals, colleagues, clientele and family members. Those who have an opportunity to live and work in another country not only contribute to the development of that country, but they also contribute numerous mutual benefits within America. Lessons and practices were learned from this study that can lead to enhanced international impact across participants and near-associates based upon endeavors that are

properly designed and implemented. This study shows that there are three important training junctures for international assignments: before one goes (pre-training), while one is there (reinforcement), and after one returns (de-briefing).

Introduction

Cooperative Extension professionals have been utilized in many different ways to fulfill international education efforts. Because of the close working relationship with local clientele, Extension agents may often be involved in international exchanges or hosting foreign visitors. 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 (Place et. al., 2000; Ludwig, 1999; Williams and Brewer, 2000).

Extension professionals are supportive of international involvement. A survey among Extension agents in southern U.S. by Rosson and Sanders (1991) found that 86 percent of those surveyed felt that Extension programs should include more global issues; and 77 percent felt that constituents could benefit from programs with an international focus. Data collected concerning Extension's organizational support of programs with an international focus indicated that 37 percent agreed, 25 percent disagreed, and 38 percent were unsure of Extension's support. More recent research has documented similar results (Knight, 2000; Ludwig, 1999). These results demonstrate the commitment and interest that Extension agents have for being part of international endeavors.

An integral part of Extension's international involvement that has recently received attention is the personal and professional impact that is attained through such efforts. Studies are documenting the positive effects that Extension faculty and agents derive from their actual participation in an international endeavor. These professionals have experienced increased international awareness and understanding, incorporation of international components into Extension programming, improved self-esteem, and many have profited from a renewed interest in their Extension career. In addition, people outside of an actual international project have experienced various levels of benefit (Place et. al., 2000; Williams and Brewer, 2000).

The Polish-American Extension Project (PAEP) was an agricultural technical assistance program designed to help address the needs of Poland in relation to agricultural production, management, Extension methodologies, and free-market economics. The PAEP was initiated in 1989 and ended in 1995 with a primary objective of improving the structure of Polish agriculture with the goal of increasing agricultural production efficiency and improving rural quality of life.

The project was established as a joint educational project of the United States Department of Agriculture's Extension Service (USDA-ES) and the Polish Ministry of Agriculture and Food Economy's (MAFE) Agricultural Advisory Service. Between 1990 and 1995, more than 100 American Extension professionals representing 31 land grant universities traveled to Poland to work on this project. Over the period of the project, 70 Extension professionals representing 26 states served one or more six-month assignments as advisors at provincial-level agricultural advisory

centers (Osrodek Doradztwa Rolniczego - ODRs) in Poland (Place et al., 2000). This group of 70 PAEP participants was the population for this study.

Methods and Data Sources

The purpose of this study was to determine the specific components of international involvement that lead to personal and professional impact among Extension professionals and near-associates. There were three objectives of the study: to determine factors related to personal and professional impact among project participants; to determine impact-related factors among immediate and extended family members, and; to determine impact-related factors among Extension colleagues and clientele.

The developed questionnaire was reviewed by an expert panel of faculty from Penn State and Michigan State Universities for content and face validity, and adjustments were made to the questionnaire prior to pilot testing. The instrument was pilot tested among a group of individuals from Penn State University who had knowledge of international technical assistance programs. Input received from the pilot test group was incorporated into the instrument.

Survey methodologies as recommended by Dillman et al., 1995 were utilized for the study. Introductory letters were sent from the Program Specialist of USDA International Extension Programs to state level Extension administrators for the 26 states that had participants in the PAEP program. The questionnaire was sent to the 70 PAEP participants with an informing and encouraging cover letter that provided an overview of the study, what the questionnaire entailed and confidentiality. Completed questionnaires were requested to be returned in an enclosed self-addressed and postage-paid envelope (Dillman et al., 1995).

The nineteen-page questionnaire consisted of the following major sections: work and living environment; perceptions about the international experience; respondent and home Extension unit characteristics while in Poland; characteristics of the U.S. Extension unit and community while in Poland; nature of the assignment in Poland; the U.S. international Extension climate; reentry and adjustment; output and visibility; and key linkages.

After two waves of personal phone calls and remailings of the instrument there were 67 returns for an overall response rate of 95.7 percent. Subsequent data analysis showed no difference between early and late respondents. This is an extremely high response rate for such a comprehensive questionnaire (Dillman et al., 1995). The high response rate supported the researchers assumption that participants were deeply committed and sincerely involved.

Data were coded and entered into a preset SPSS quantitative analysis program. Basic statistical analysis tests were initially conducted for observation of means, modes, frequencies and standard deviations. Qualitative data from the questionnaire were entered into a word document and categorized for subsequent content and critical incident analysis. The qualitative data were used to clarify and/or substantiate findings revealed via the participant questionnaire.

Like variables were grouped and summated to create variable blocks for analysis. Cronbach's alpha reliability was conducted on each variable block, and standardized alpha coefficients ranged from .61 to .92. Items that were not indexed were used as individual variables. These blocks of variables and individual variables were correlated with three dependent variables: the extent of personal and professional impact on PAEP participants, extent of impact on immediate and extended family members of PAEP participants, and extent of impact on colleagues and clientele of PAEP participants.

Results and Conclusions

The three dependent variables utilized in this study are reported as perceived by PAEP participants. Participants (N=67) perceived that they received the greatest benefit (8.5) from the PAEP followed by their family members (6.8) and colleagues/clientele (5.2). Each dependent variable was derived from an 11-point scale that ranged from 0 = no impact to 10 = extensive impact.

The majority of the participants were male (75%) while 25% were female. Most were married (73%) while 27% were either separated/divorced/widowed or single. Participants were also well educated as 43% were at the Doctorate level, 54% at Master's level, and only 3% were at the Bachelor's level. There was a wide mix of age among participants as most were in the 50 to 59 years of age category. There was also a wide range of years of employment with Extension (1 to 40 years) with a mean of 19 years.

Multivariate Analysis

The multivariate analysis was conducted through multiple linear regression. Regression is a technique that establishes the relationship of a variable while simultaneously controlling for the effects of the other variables in the model. A reduced or parsimonious model is presented for each of the dependent variables. All of the variables that had a statistically significant correlation (data available from the lead author upon request) with the dependent variable were placed simultaneously into a regression model. Variables that were not statistically significant in the regression model were removed, leaving only the significant variables, which are presented, in the following tables. Each table presents the regression coefficients (*b*), the standard error of the coefficient (SE of *b*), and the standardized beta (Standardized B). The standardized beta allows comparisons of relative strength of each variable within the model.

Overall Impact

Table One presents the reduced regression model for Overall Impact. All variables in the model are statistically significant at the .05 level or better. The overall Adjusted R^2 for the model is .31, meaning that 31 percent of the variation within the model is explained. The most important variable in the model, as seen in the standardized beta, is Changed Perspective on Self. This relationship indicates that the greater positive change in self-perception as a result of the PAEP was significantly

related to the overall positive impact on the personal and professional life of the participants. This suggests that among the ways participants are impacted by the exchange experience, self-perception is very important. This also suggests that international experience fundamentally and positively changes the participants. The second most important variable was Visibility of Your Assignment. Respondents that worked at making their assignment visible reported a more positive overall impact. Visibility of Assignment assesses whether the participants communicated with clientele and colleagues through calls, press releases, or newsletters before, during, or after the Polish assignment. This indicates that it is important for program participants to relate their international experiences to their acquaintances. Respondents with Masters Degrees tended to report a more positive overall impact than those with doctorates. Perhaps this is due to the fact that those with Master’s degrees have fewer opportunities for international assignments, so therefore they valued it more.

Table One. Regression Analysis of Overall Impact and the significant independent variables.

Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE of b</i>	Standardized B
Visibility of Your Assignment	.042*	.019	.263
Highest Education Level	-.275*	.130	-.213
Changed Perspective on Self	.565*	.185	.343
Constant	6.755*	.837	
Adjusted R ²	.31		

* = .05 N=67

Impact on Immediate and Extended Family

Table Two presents the reduced regression model of Impact on Immediate and Extended Family. Four variables are statistically significant in this model and they account for 38 percent of explained variation in the model. The best predictor in this model was Family Members Accompanied on assignment. Those participants who traveled with their families were more likely to have a positive impact on family life than those participants that did not. Position and Relationships in Extension was the second most important variable in the analysis. The personal relationships that are formed in an international experience are an important contributing factor to a positive family impact. Age was the third most important variable. Respondents that were older tended to report a more positive family impact. Older participants are likely to have grown children who are out of the household or are capable of taking care of themselves during the international experience. When participants are younger, family participation can help counter any negative impacts on family during the assignment. Last, Visibility of Your Assignment tended to positively impact family. It may be that higher visibility in participation has the effect of justifying or rationalizing any short-term hardships related to the assignment.

Impact on Colleagues and Clientele

The last dependent variable and reduced regression model, Impact on Colleagues and Clientele, is presented on Table Three. The model had an adjusted R² of .46, and there are three significant

variables. Awareness of Assignment was the best predictor. When participants perceived that colleagues and friends were aware of their assignment, they tended to indicate a more positive impact on colleagues and clientele. Visibility of Your Assignment was the second most important variable, and the nature of the relationship is similar to that of Awareness. Last, higher reporting of the Extent of Work Communication was associated with higher reported positive impacts for colleagues and clientele.

Table Two. Regression Analysis of Impact on Immediate and Extended Family and the significant independent variables.

Variables	<i>B</i>	SE of <i>b</i>	Standardized B
Family Members Accompanied	1.960*	.603	.351
Visibility of Your Assignment	.071*	.031	.215
Position & Relationships in Extension	.458*	.221	.245
Age	.596*	.228	.228
Constant	-2.101*	1.010	
Adjusted R ²	.38		

* = .05 N=67

Table Three. The Regression Analysis of Impact on Colleagues and Clientele and the significant independent variables.

Variables	<i>b</i>	SE of <i>b</i>	Standardized B
Visibility of Your Assignment	.095*	.041	.275
Awareness of Your Assignment	.177*	.060	.328
Extent of Work Communication	.145*	.061	.261
Constant	-4.408*	1.438	
Adjusted R ²	.46		

* = .05 N=67

Discussion

The results of this study have demonstrated that Extension professionals perceive personal and professional growth for themselves and near-associates through international experience. Blocks of variables examined included: their work and living environment, perceptions about their international experience, the nature of the international assignment, the U.S. Extension climate, reentry and adjustment, output and visibility of the assignment, and demographic characteristics.

The international experience positively impacted self-perception. This experience seems to have lead to new perspectives of new people and places and self-actualization. Participation in the PAEP was done voluntarily as a selfless activity to help people in need after the fall of the communist bloc in Poland. Additionally, American participants enjoyed a high level of esteem from

Polish colleagues and clientele. This further reinforced the positive self-perception. The cumulative effect of these factors was a positive overall impact from the PAEP.

Visibility of assignment was the only variable that was statistically significant across all three impact domains. This variable measured the extent to which the participant continued to communicate to others about the assignment. It is important for participants to understand that the experience continues even after they return from an international assignment. This may be due to the fact that the more people who are familiar with the international assignment, even after the fact, the more positive the impact on all domains. Visibility skills need to be an integral part of any type of training for international assignments.

It is important not to restrict international assignments to doctoral-level faculty. The data show that Master's level participants benefit to a higher degree over those with more education. Those with Master's degrees tend to have fewer international opportunities, so perhaps they valued it more.

The family impact model indicated that participants whose family accompanied them perceived a greater impact among their immediate and extended family. This documents the importance for family involvement in these types of international endeavors. Also older participants perceived a greater impact within this variable. This may be due to the fact that these participants had greater flexibility as compared to younger counterparts.

Positive impacts on colleagues and clientele were enhanced through communication during the assignment. This included creating awareness and communicating with colleagues and clientele while in Poland. The nature of the relationship showed that if participants did not actively communicate during the assignment, it lead to negative outcomes.

Educational Importance

This study has revealed the importance of international involvement for enhancing global knowledge and understanding, and subsequently, the impact among Extension professionals, colleagues, clientele and family members. Those who have an opportunity to live and work in another country not only contribute to the development of that country, but they also contribute numerous mutual benefits within America. Lessons and practices have been learned from this study that will lead to enhanced international impact across participants and near-associates based upon endeavors that are properly designed and implemented. Globally competent Extension professionals that are committed to Extension and its mission will result from implementing these principles.

There are some direct implications for those who facilitate international experiences. This study shows that there are three important junctures for international assignments: before you go (pre-training), while you are there (reinforcement), and after one returns (de-briefing). Important information to share for pre-training aside from culture, logistics, health and other basic issues includes enabling family members to participate. Pre-training also needs to consist of guidance about communicating to colleagues and clientele before, during, and after an assignment. Important

issues for reinforcement while on assignment include communicating to colleagues and clientele, and utilizing means to increase awareness and understanding of the assignment. Upon returning from an international assignment, it is important to understand that the assignment needs to be incorporated into Extension work, to follow-through on things that commenced on the assignment, and to continue to tell the story of the international experience. It is vitally important for those who facilitate international assignments to convey to participants the important factors of a positive experience through pre-training, reinforcement and debriefing.

Cited References

- Acker, D. G., & Scanes, C. G. (1998). A case for globalizing U.S. colleges of agriculture. Journal of International Agricultural and Extension Education 5(1): 59-62.
- Andrews, M. L., & Lambur, M. (1986). International programming in the Cooperative Extension System: An eleven state survey of organizational capacity and field staff attitudes and practices. Understanding World Agriculture. CES & CICHE
- Bahn, H. M. (1997). The role of the Polish-American extension project in the post-communist transition of the Polish agricultural advisory system. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University.
- Dillman, D. A., Clark, J. R., & Sinclair, M. D. (1995). How prenotice letters, stamped return envelopes and reminder postcards affect mailback response rates for census questionnaires. Survey Methodology 21(2):1-7.
- Knight, J. (2000). International interest of Arizona Extension professionals. Paper presented at the AIAEE 16th Annual Research Meeting, Arlington, Virginia.
- Ludwig, B. G. (1993). Attitudes toward internationalizing. Journal of Extension. [On-line serial] 31(2). Available online: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1993summer/intl3.html>.
- Ludwig, B. G. (1999). Globalizing Extension professionals. Journal of Extension. [On-line serial] 37(4). Available online: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1999august/rb5.html>.
- Moser, B. D., ed. (1998). Globalizing agricultural science and education programs for America. Washington, DC: NASULGC-Int Agri. Section.
- Place, N. T., Evans, D. E., Andrews, M. P., & Crago, N. E. (2000). Implications and impact among American Extension professionals and near-associates resulting from the Polish-American Extension Project. Journal of International Agricultural and Extension Education 7(1): 5-16.
- Richardson, J. G. & Woods, F. (1991). Expanding our horizons internationally. Journal of Extension. [On-line serial] 29(2). Available online: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1991summer/a6>.

Williams, W. & Brewer, F. (2000). The perceived impact of international training programs on personal and professional growth of Extension participants: A case study. Paper presented at the AIAEE 16th Annual Professional Meeting, Arlington, Virginia.