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**Internationalizing Extension: A Case Study Involving Faculty, Students and Stakeholders**

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**Abstract**

A summative evaluation was conducted to determine the benefit and change resulting from a unique 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 evaluation was to determine how participants have changed behavior in their professional life, and; to determine change in attitudes toward international issues and 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 Cooperative 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.

**Keywords:** Extension, Internationalizing Extension, Impact Evaluation, Personal and Professional Impact, Global Competence, Costa Rica, Florida

## **Introduction**

Latino culture has taken the United States by storm. From the Latin Grammy Awards to the runaway hit *Mind of Mencia* on the Comedy Central Channel, Hispanic culture has made its mark on mainstream media (Salazar, 2006; Deggans, 2006). Nowhere is that more evident than in Florida. Hispanics make up 19% of Florida's population, and in some counties like Miami-Dade more than 60% of the community (US Census Bureau).

While Hispanic groups may appear similar, each community holds its own subtle differences. Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans each have their own communication styles and deal with different issues (Nielsen, 2000; Landale, 1997). Extension agents and government officials have a daunting task trying to serve these diverse communities. They are faced with creating educational programs and public policy based on their understanding of their constituents. Studies have shown that increased awareness of diverse cultures can foster better evaluation of complex situations involving different types of people (Mahoney, 2004). One of the best ways to attain cultural awareness is through immersion into a different culture (Nieto, 2006).

This evaluation study explores increasing the cultural sensitivity of extension agents, government officials, college faculty, and students through participation in the Internationalizing Extension Training Project (IETP). The IETP was created by the University of Florida Extension Service and focused on travel to Central America. We partnered with EARTH University, the Costa Rican Extension Service, and local government to create an experience that engages the participants in the culture, introduces them to the nation's governmental structure, and discusses underlying issues facing Costa Ricans.

The participants were chosen based on their impact within their surrounding communities. They represent change agents in their respective fields namely, local politics, community education, and university education. Many of the participants must decide public policy and design educational programming based on their understanding of their minority constituents. A majority of the participants are also opinion leaders and have a motivating affect within their spheres' of influence. Increased cultural sensitivity within the group of participants could eventually impact a much larger group of the population. Studies have shown that increased international awareness and understanding can improve self-esteem in the workplace, reinvigorate careers, and increase involvement in community education (Place, Evans, Andrews & Crago, 2000).

## **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this program was to increase cultural sensitivity as it is expressed in the attitudes and behaviors of the extension faculty, government officials, extension specialist, and graduate students participating in the Internationalizing Extension Training Project. The objectives of this evaluation were: (a) To determine participant behavior change; (b) To determine participant attitude change.

## **Methods**

The IETP project consisted of four face-to-face sessions and a ten-day visit to Costa Rica. The authors of this study were involved as instructors and facilitators throughout the course of this project. The face-to-face sessions began with two introductory sessions held at the University of Florida. The first session held in December 2003 was geared toward learning about the program, teambuilding, and understanding international extension. Session two, held in January 2004, focused

on understanding Costa Rica, EARTH University, Costa Rican Extension and preparing for the on-site visit. Cultural sensitivity content was blended into the first two sessions.

The ten-day onsite visit in March was designed to expose participants to multiple aspects of Costa Rican culture, 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 on how they intended to incorporate this experience into their plan of work. This study was conducted in October - November 2004 as a summative evaluation and an impact study of the overall program to determine not only what was learned, but practice and behavior changes among the participants.

A questionnaire was given to the participants at the beginning of the project and at its completion. The questionnaire was adapted from one used in previous research (Place et al., 2002) to specifically address the study objectives. 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. Completed questionnaires were received from all participants.

### **Results and Conclusions**

All the participants had ties to agricultural education or dealt with agricultural issues in the workplace. Prior to participating in the IETP, participants denoted high interests in international activities and in developing foreign language skills, but had little experience in traveling with or chaperoning groups abroad.

All of the graduate students who participated in the program were female, two of whom were Doctoral students and one a Master's student. The state extension specialist (male) was from a mixed

(urban/rural) community. Two of the extension faculty worked in rural communities while two considered the communities in which they worked to be urban. Two of the faculty members were county extension directors, in the areas of agriculture and family and consumer sciences (FCS). The other two faculty members consisted of a FCS and an Environmental Horticulture agent. Two extension faculty were female while the other two were male.

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.

### *Objective 1: Changes in Behavior*

Overall the major behavior changes related to the interaction between the participants and their clientele and local community, including their increased ability to work well with people. There was also an increase in outreach activities relating to their participation in the project. Many of the participants took available opportunities to share their experiences with other people in formal presentations or in individual meetings.

The primary changes in behavior across the participant groups were in three areas: “Developed skills of working with people” (M = 4.16); “Relationships with their clientele, constituents, departments, or colleagues (M = 4.16); “Position or involvement in professional organizations” (M = 4.0).

*Increased Ability to Work with Others;* In terms of behavior change in the workplace, extension faculty described 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.

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 2: Changes in Attitude*

Overall, as a result of participation in the IETP, respondents expressed a significant positive change in participants' perspectives of U.S. extension and their attitudes about Costa Rica as a nation. They also gained an increased interest in international activities and a new appreciation for extension's role in international development.

*Increased Awareness of the Impact of Extension;* Commissioners 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]."

*Broader International Perspective;* 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.

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.”

### **Conclusion, Recommendations and Implications**

This evaluation has revealed the importance of international involvement for enhancing global knowledge and understanding; and subsequently, positive behavior and attitude changes. 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 to numerous spill-over benefits in their workplace and in other spheres’ of influence. Most significantly, participants actively counseled others and got them interested and involved with international efforts. This project resulted in globally competent extension professionals, students and local officials that have grown more culturally sensitive and have a greater appreciation for international efforts in Florida and specifically through the Florida Cooperative Extension Service.

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 got people excited, and as a result they wanted to tell others. Many people beyond the actual participants were affected by this program through the multiplier-effect that extension has embodied during its existence. Because of this, and extension’s grassroots presence, it is well suited to conduct a myriad of locally-based nonformal educational programs related to international extension and global issues. As a result, local constituents will

have the opportunity to better understand international issues and how it affects each of us within our own communities.

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 strong teamwork, rapport and collaborations. They were able to learn from one another by gaining a much greater appreciation for values, beliefs, roles and responsibilities at home and abroad.

Most significantly, this first-hand international experience brought about positive changes and behaviors in how participants interact with diverse people. Participants are more culturally cognizant and comfortable with interacting with people who are different. In order for Cooperative Extension to be most relevant for today’s diverse society, this change in perspective and practice is critical.

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