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Lessons Learned From Conducting Workshops with University Agricultural Faculty and Secondary School Agricultural Teachers in Egypt

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Introduction

The global economy of the 21st century provides considerable opportunities for professional agriculturalists to engage with people beyond the borders of their own country. This trend has led many agricultural universities to implement programs that provide international experiences for students and faculty. Additionally, faculty from the United States have opportunities to conduct teaching, research, and outreach projects in international settings. Although considerable opportunities exist, faculty and students face numerous barriers to international activities. Wingenbach, Chmielewski, Smith, Piña, and Hamilton (2006) reported that barriers to students included stereotypes, language, and concerns of personal safety. Hand, Ricketts, and Bruening (2007) reported that barriers to faculty included costs, limited resources, and time commitment. Andreasen (2003)

identified many of the same barriers and classified barriers as either external or internal factors. Although numerous barriers exist, as Hand et al. noted, faculty also benefit from international activities through personal and professional development.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper was to document the experiences of a team of faculty that conducted workshops in the Arab Republic of Egypt. This inquiry can provide guidance for future activities that include: (1) delivering workshops in a foreign country and/or (2) working with people from Egypt. Lessons learned from this team can provide a starting point for faculty planning similar activities.

Methods

In July of 2007, a three-member team from the U.S. conducted a series of

workshops in the Arab Republic of Egypt as part of the Capacity Building component of the Agricultural Export for Rural Income (AERI) Linkage Project, conducted by Midwest Universities Consortium for International Activities (MUCIA) and the University of Illinois, and funded by USAID. The purpose of the workshops was to provide secondary agricultural teachers with the skills to implement internship experiences with their students. For the workshops, a train-the-trainer approach was taken. During the first workshop, the team presented to university faculty. During the second workshop, the team presented to secondary teachers and had one set of university faculty translate. During the third workshop, a different set of university faculty presented, assisted by the first set of faculty. A similar approach had been taken by an earlier team from the U.S. (Swanson, Cano, Samy, Hynes, & Swan, 2007).

Throughout each workshop, each team member carefully observed and noted responses and reactions to each activity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each evening, the three-member team met to debrief and reflect on the experiences of the day, identifying themes that emerged. One team member served as the recorder and captured the collective reflections. Upon return to the U.S., one team member transcribed the reflections and provided the other team members opportunities to critique the data (i.e. member-checking).

Observations and Reflections

Lessons Learned About Conducting Workshops in a Foreign Country

- *Background Information* – Understanding the background and situation for the country in which the workshops is being conducted, the overall project, and the participants of the workshops was important.
- *Planning* – Having a clear vision for workshop goals and objectives was critical in planning the workshops.

- *Flexibility* – Although goals were identified in advance and content was outlined, it was important to remain flexible and make adjustments as needed to address immediate needs identified during the workshops.
- *Language* – Effectively translating the true meaning of an idea from one language goes beyond simply translating words, particularly when using oral communication.
- *Translation* – When using translators, it was helpful to have people that are familiar with the content being presented.
- *Selection of Presenters* – For the second and third workshops, it was critical to select faculty that clearly understood the content, were good teachers, and were able to quickly and effectively translate.
- *Interpersonal Connections* – Making personal connections with the workshop participants aided in the overall effectiveness of the workshops.

Lessons Learned About Working with Egyptians

- *Social Learners* – When given the opportunity for discussion, participants enjoyed opportunities to interact with each other and team members.
- *Inquisitiveness* – When given the opportunity, participants liked to ask questions.
- *Innovativeness* – Participants were open to new ideas, hungry for new materials, and welcomed our assistance.
- *Conservative/Traditional* – Although participants were open to new ideas, it was difficult for them to shift their mindsets to new ways of doing things. In other words, it was difficult for them to “think outside the box.”
- *Rewards* – Both the university faculty and secondary teachers seemed excited about implementing new educational activities without obvious extrinsic rewards for doing so.

Recommendations, Implications, and Application

The international activities conducted during this project were rewarding for all team members. We strongly encourage all faculty to consider engaging in international development activities and programs. Based on the observations and experiences, two primary recommendations are offered.

Know the potential audience, learn the culture, and understand the local situation.

Prior to working in an international setting, immerse yourself in the culture of the country in which the work will occur. The temptation is always to “Americanize” others, imposing the values and structures that are common in the United States upon them. Learn to appreciate that educators in other countries typically have few incentives to create change, but they may be more intrinsically motivated than American educators. Remember that people are people, regardless of any animosity or differences between governments. These recommendations are supported by Andreasen’s (2003) work, which gave similar recommendations, including understanding the purpose of the project; learning about the culture and people; starting with an open mind; and have an appreciation for interaction with people.

Plan well, and be prepared to alter plans as the activity or program progresses.

Communication can be difficult at times, so concepts are more important than words. Be prepared to have multiple ways of explaining concepts. When facilitating workshops, specific instructions and time allotments can help control time in cultures

that are less time-dependent. These suggestions are also supported by Finley and Price’s (1994) text *International Agriculture and principles of adult learning* (Knowles, 1984).

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