

# Examining the Student Impacts of Three International Capstone Experiences



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## Abstract

International experiences – semester-long study abroad, short-term study trips, internships, or integration of global issues into on-campus curricula – are widely accepted as a growing need for today’s generation of students. This study examined the impacts of three short-term international capstone experiences on student knowledge and attitudes. On the first trip, a group of 15 College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALs) Ambassadors traveled to Egypt for 11 days in May of 2009. On the second trip, a group of nine students from the CALs Leadership Institute traveled throughout Costa Rica on a 10-day trip in August of 2010. On the third trip, a group of seven CALs Ambassadors traveled to China for 13 days in May of 2011. Participants from all three groups showed an increase in knowledge (actual and perceived) related to agriculture in the destination country and international agriculture in general. Changes in attitudes about international agricultural and international travel were mixed. Participants generally had more positive attitudes about traveling internationally, but expressed mixed attitudes about the importance of CALs students gaining international experience.

## Introduction

Students today are faced with the challenge and opportunity of a culture influenced by media and technology that transcend traditional borders. Overwhelmed with media messages of international events, natural disasters, and political innuendo, students have the world at their fingertips; yet, many choose to distance themselves from learning about globally relevant topics and issues (Wingenbach et al., 2003). Collegiate programs, such as study abroad, focused study tours, and service-learning, offer students the opportunity to immerse themselves in a different culture for a period of time. Aiding in the accessibility of global awareness and understanding, international elements in curriculum development

and experiential education activities have continued to grow in popularity and priority in higher education over the past two decades (Altbach and Knight, 2007; Moore et al., 2011). A 2008 NAFSA report mentioned, “Despite the momentum and a widespread recognition among the American public of the importance and the educational value of study abroad, higher education institutions vary substantially in the degree to which they have committed to the advancement of study abroad as part of their internationalization efforts” (p. 1). International activities have an important role for students within colleges of agriculture, as the networks of agricultural resources continue to expand around the globe (Connors, 2004). Responsibility lies with colleges and universities to adequately prepare agricultural students to enter a global society and diverse work environment (Zhai and Scheer, 2004). Students should develop leadership skills, experience other cultures and societies, and have a basic grasp on our global system, which will transfer broadly to various career trajectories in an expanding global market upon graduation (NAFSA, 2008). Addressing multiple facets of development for students and faculty, including professional skills, knowledge of international agricultural practices and cultural understanding, are key to creating a value-driven, meaningful experience.

Cross-cultural opportunities unveil the responsibility placed upon this generation as global citizens, including the challenge of connecting local and global. Universities must be at the center of developing transferable skills for not only future careers but also as global citizenship training; global awareness and understanding will pave the way for this generation of students to step up as leaders in the community and world (Battistoni et al., 2009; Hanson, 2010; Mayo et al., 2008; Moore et al., 2011; Munck, 2010). Although some students have a strong awareness and understanding of international agricultural issues, the changing nature of such issues demonstrates the

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apparent need for such efforts to widen perspectives and knowledge (Wingenbach et al., 2003). Clearly, international awareness and experiences are valuable opportunities universities need to continue developing as the workforce demands for such skills, and one that students should explore to remain competitive in the job market (Acker and Scanes, 1998; Battistoni et al., 2009; Bender et al., 2009; Connors, 2004; Irani et al., 2006; Moore et al., 2011). This common agreement can fuel the process of determining the most effective and efficient means of skill development in an international experience, which can garner broader commitment from universities and create greater accessibility to students.

Building global citizens must be intentional and well incorporated in the curriculum and mission of universities (Etling, 1994; Hanson, 2010; NAFSA, 2008). Experiential learning activities, especially those including travel, offer a context for developing a broader understanding of international agricultural policies, products, and culture (Wingenbach et al., 2003). Experiential-focused programs enable students to be immersed into a different culture and make a lasting impact on a personal level (Tarrant, 2010). Specifically, Acker and Scanes (1998) emphasized the impact of such experiences:

The quality of all programs – education of undergraduates, development of the next generation of scientists as graduate students and post-doctoral fellows, research projects, extension programs, economic development of the state or region, and support of strategic goals of the agribusiness sector – is enhanced when they are pervaded by multiple international dimensions. (p. 59)

Integrating service-learning into an international experience enhances student interaction with the culture and community for a new level of learning through a service experience (Battistoni et al., 2009; Chieffo and Griffiths, 2004; Doyle et al., 2010; Munck, 2010; Tonkin and Quiroga, 2004). Etling (1994) emphasized, “*Citizens of the world need to understand that they can contribute to the local, district, state, regional, national, and global communities, to which they belong, in a concrete way-that they can make a difference individually and in groups*” (p. 79). An international service experience with an agricultural and life sciences focus provides the opportunity for students to gain the full benefits of international travel and grasp global citizenship.

Minimizing barriers to such experiences is an imperative consideration throughout the preparation stages of an international service and learning experience. Financial concerns, time commitment,

and overall perceived barriers of attributes to be gained from the experience are the primary barriers to an international experience for students (Irani et al., 2006). It is imperative for participants to be properly prepared for such an experience to gain its full benefits (Connors, 2004). Students should be aware of the various cultural aspects of the travel destination they will encounter, as well as a full understanding of the itinerary and expectations of them throughout the travel experience. With the comfort of knowing what is to come, students can focus on the whole experience and immersing into the culture to play an active role as a global citizen (Tonkin and Quiroga, 2004). With international connections infused into the curriculum as preparation for travel, students gain the knowledge to continue making connections back to curriculum while engaged in the international experience (Greenberg, 2008; Radhakrishna and Dominguez, 1999; Wingenbach et al., 2003). Time for processing and reflection may be necessary for a full realization of the value of an international experience or course (Irani et al., 2006). Just as minimizing barriers and preparation for travel are of great importance to the overall student travel experience, reflection on the experience once returning home is an important component in gleaning the most knowledge and cultural awareness to enhance student growth as a global citizen.

The existing literature paints a clear picture about the importance of conducting international experiences for collegiate students studying agriculture and related sciences. There are limited studies that examined the impact of these experiences, particularly short-term study trips. This study outlined the student impacts of three short-term study trips.

## Methods

This descriptive case study used survey methods to examine three international capstone experiences: (a) College of Agricultural and Life Sciences Ambassadors’ trip to Egypt, (b) College of Agricultural and Life Sciences Leadership Institute members’ trip to Costa Rica, and (c) College of Agricultural and Life Sciences Ambassadors’ trip to China. The University of Florida Institutional Review Board approved the activities reported in this research and signed informed consent was obtained from each participant. The population included the 31 student participants of these travel experiences; 15 students traveled to Egypt, nine students traveled to Costa Rica, and seven students traveled to China. Each experience was 10 to 13 days in length and included various cultural, agricultural, and iconic experiences to the area. The

results of this study are limited to those students who participated in these experiences.

All three groups of students were evaluated utilizing a pre- and post-travel instrument adapted from the work of Connors (2004), which assesses student knowledge of the destination country and attitude towards the international experience. The instrument contained nine fill-in-the-blank knowledge questions; 16 items to assess attitudes about the international experience with a four point Likert scale; and seven background/demographic questions. Connors reported a KR20 of .73 for the knowledge assessment and a Cronbach’s alpha of .74 for the attitude instrument. The instruments were administered face-to-face by the trip coordinator.

The first trip included fifteen students serving as ambassadors for the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences as they traveled to the Arab Republic of Egypt for 11 days in May of 2009 to develop a broader and more global perspective on agriculture education, production, processing and marketing systems. Students were asked to enroll in a three-hour study course that focused on Egyptian culture and customs, which provided an overview of the customs, religion and culture from an Egyptian prospective. Ambassadors were exposed to information including geography, people, and statistics as they relate to Egypt, along with history, government, politics, economy, agriculture, and the impact the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has on agricultural education in the country. While in Egypt, students were asked to keep a detailed journal of their thoughts, perceptions and observations as they visited historical sites like the Great Pyramids of Giza, the Sphinx, the Valley of the Kings, Muhammad Ali Mosque, and the Luxor and Karnak Temples. In addition to making these historical stops Ambassadors met with students from Cairo University and El Qarna High School. While exploring secondary and higher education was of great importance, Ambassadors also visited an 8,000-acre family-owned farm that revealed the limited exposure Egypt has in the global market.

The second experience included nine College of Agricultural and Life Science students involved in the CALS Leadership Institute as they traveled to Costa Rica for ten days in August of 2010. Students were prepared for the travel experience through six class meetings leading up to departure, which overviewed the culture, agricultural practices, and role of eco-tourism in the country. The trip took the group to four locations in the country, including San Jose, Jaco, Arenal, and EARTH University. The students were exposed to the Costa Rican culture as they interacted

with the people and local students, toured coffee and banana plantations, and participated in eco-tourism activities. A core component of the trip included working with EARTH University, where students helped to build a biodigester for a Costa Rican family, learned about sustainable agricultural practices, and visited with staff and students. This international service and learning experience serves as a core component of the Leadership Institute.

The third experience included seven students serving as ambassadors for the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences as they traveled to the People’s Republic of China for 13 days in May 2011. Students enrolled in a three-hour credit course to prepare for the international trip, which included education on the demographics, culture, religion, agricultural practices, geography, education, and government of the People’s Republic of China. The group traveled to Beijing and Shanghai, as well as rural areas of the He Bei Province during the trip. Students had the opportunity to meet with peers at Beijing Agriculture University, experienced cultural elements including an acrobatic performance and dumpling dinner and fold dancing show, and visited the Great Wall, TianAnMen Square, and Forbidden City. An important component of the trip was to learn about various agricultural practices in the People’s Republic of China, which comprised of vegetable/agricultural markets, a farming village, dairy farm and processing plant, the Kun Shan Agricultural Development Park, and a silk factory.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Egypt**

Data were received from the fifteen students who participated in the Egypt travel experience. This group of students varied considerably on their previous international travel (see Table 1). One-third had never traveled internationally and 40% had traveled abroad for more than four weeks.

*Table 1. Egypt Participants’ International Experience prior to Trip*

Previous International Experience	n	%
None	5	33
1–2 weeks	2	13
2–4 weeks	2	13
More than four weeks	6	40

Participants expressed more positive perceptions of international travel and the importance of learning about international agriculture (see Table 2). Notably, students had more positive responses to all but two of the statements following the trip. Students also improved in their understanding of the important role international experiences can play, as well as a greater comfort in the safety of international travel.

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**Table 2. Egypt Participants' Attitudes about International Experiences (N = 15)**

	Percent Strongly Disagree	Percent Disagree	Percent Agree	Percent Strongly Agree
	Pre/Post	Pre/Post	Pre/Post	Pre/Post
International travel is educational.	0/0	0/0	20/0	80/100
I am excited to learn about Egyptian culture.	0/0	0/0	27/20	73/80
I like learning about different cultures.	0/0	0/0	33/20	67/80
Knowledge of international agriculture will help me in my career.	0/0	7/7	67/60	26/33
Knowledge of international agriculture is important for all CALS students.	0/0	27/7	47/47	26/47
International experiences are an important part of CALS student activities.	0/7	7/0	67/13	26/80
I am worried about the quality of water in Egypt. <sup>a</sup>	0/0	27/20	53/53	20/27
It is important to study information about a foreign country prior to traveling there.	0/0	0/7	33/33	67/60
I am worried about being able to communicate with people in Egypt. <sup>a</sup>	0/13	27/67	53/20	20/0
International agriculture should be an integral part of CALS undergraduate studies.	7/0	20/7	53/53	13/40
I am worried about eating different types of foods while in Egypt. <sup>a</sup>	7/20	60/33	20/33	13/13
I am worried about crime while in Egypt. <sup>a</sup>	7/13	47/67	33/20	13/0
I am worried about my safety outside the United States. <sup>a</sup>	13/13	47/40	27/47	13/0
I am worried about using different currency while in Egypt. <sup>a</sup>	40/53	47/47	13/0	0/0
It is important to speak the language of the country you will be visiting.	7/13	67/53	20/27	7/7

<sup>a</sup>Negatively worded statements.

Participants also showed increases in their knowledge (perceived and actual) of Egypt, Egyptian agriculture, and international agriculture as a result of the trip. Increases were shown in basic knowledge of Egypt's geography and agricultural knowledge following the trip (see Table 3). Questions focused on the language, capital, geographic location, exports, bordering countries, primary agricultural exports, and provinces in the country. Beyond the recall of factual information, students also showed gains in their overall perceptions of knowledge about Egyptian agriculture and international agriculture in general (see Table 4).

**Table 3. Egypt Participants' Knowledge**

Question	Answer	Percent Correct
		Pre/Post
What is the primary language spoken in Egypt?	Arabic	67/100
What is the capital of Egypt?	Cairo	93/100
Where is Egypt located?	Northeast Africa	67/83
What is the currency in Egypt?	Egyptian Pound	13/100
What percentage of exports from Egypt are agricultural products?	11%	0/0
What countries border Egypt?	Libya, Sudan, Israel	13/40
What are Egypt's primary agricultural exports?	Cotton, Fruits, Vegetables	13/23
Egypt is bordered by what two bodies of water?	Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea	50/93
How many governorates (provinces) are there in Egypt?	27	0/0
Overall		35/60

**Table 4. Egypt Participants' Self-perceived Level of Knowledge of Egyptian and International Agriculture**

	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
	Pre/Post	Pre/Post	Pre/Post	Pre/Post
Knowledge of international agriculture	27/7	40/47	27/47	7/0
Knowledge of Egyptian agriculture	73/0	20/7	7/86	0/7

well as a greater comfort in the safety of international travel. They expressed mixed results about the importance of international experiences for CALS students.

Participants improved in overall knowledge of Costa Rica's basic geographical and agricultural product knowledge following the trip (see Table 7) on topics such as the language, capital, geographic location, exports, bordering countries, primary agricultural exports, and provinces in the country.

### Costa Rica

Valid results were received from all nine students who participated in the Costa Rica travel experience. This group of students also varied greatly in their previous international experience (see Table 5), although seven of the nine students had traveled internationally prior to this trip.

Changes in participant attitudes were mixed (see Table 6). Participants generally had a more positive attitude toward international travel as an educational experience and improved in their perceptions of the important role international experiences can play, as

**Table 5. Costa Rica Participants' International Experience prior to Trip**

Previous International Experience	n	%
None	2	22
1–2 weeks	2	22
2–4 weeks	0	0
More than four weeks	5	56

**Table 6. Costa Rica Participants' Attitudes about International Experiences (N = 9)**

	Percent Strongly Disagree	Percent Disagree	Percent Agree	Percent Strongly Agree
	Pre/Post	Pre/Post	Pre/Post	Pre/Post
International travel is educational.	0/0	0/0	0/0	100/100
I am excited to learn about Costa Rican agriculture.	0/0	0/0	0/11	100/89
I like learning about different cultures.	0/0	0/0	22/22	78/78
Knowledge of international agriculture will help me in my career.	0/0	0/0	11/0	89/100
Knowledge of international agriculture is important for all CALS students.	0/0	0/0	33/44	67/56
International experiences are an important part of CALS student activities.	0/0	0/11	33/33	67/56
I am worried about the quality of water in Costa Rica. <sup>a</sup>	22/22	44/56	33/22	0/0
It is important to study information about a foreign country prior to traveling there.	0/0	0/0	22/22	78/78
I am worried about being able to communicate with people in Costa Rica. <sup>a</sup>	11/0	56/78	33/22	0/0
International agriculture should be an integral part of CALS undergraduate studies.	0/0	11/0	33/33	56/67
I am worried about eating different types of foods while in Costa Rica. <sup>a</sup>	67/78	11/22	22/0	0/0
I am worried about crime while in Costa Rica. <sup>a</sup>	44/33	11/44	44/22	0/0
I am worried about my safety outside the United States. <sup>a</sup>	33/44	56/44	11/11	0/0
I am worried about using different currency while in Costa Rica. <sup>a</sup>	56/67	44/33	0/0	0/0
It is important to speak the language of the country you will be visiting.	0/11	44/44	33/22	22/22

<sup>a</sup>Negatively worded statements.

**Table 7. Costa Rica Participants Knowledge**

Question	Answer	Percent Correct Pre/Post
What is the primary language spoken in Costa Rica?	Spanish	100/89
What is the capital of Costa Rica?	San Jose	78/89
Where is Costa Rica located?	Central America	100/100
What is the currency in Costa Rica?	Colon	67/100
What percentage of exports from Costa Rica are agricultural products?	70%	22/11
What countries border Costa Rica?	Nicaragua, Panama	67/89
What are Costa Rica's primary agricultural exports?	Coffee, Bananas	56/67
Costa Rica is bordered by what two bodies of water?	Caribbean Sea, Pacific Ocean	33/67
How many provinces are there in Costa Rica?	Seven	33/56
Overall knowledge		62/73

More broadly, students also expressed an increase in self-perceived knowledge of international agriculture, and specifically to Costa Rican agricultural practices (see Table 8).

**Table 8. Costa Rica Participants' Self-perceived Level of Knowledge of Costa Rican and International Agriculture**

	Poor Pre/Post	Fair Pre/Post	Good Pre/Post	Excellent Pre/Post
Knowledge of international agriculture	22/0	67/33	11/67	0/0
Knowledge of Costa Rican agriculture	44/0	56/22	0/44	0/33

**China**

Data were received from the seven students who participated in the China travel experience. Previous international travel experience varied with this group of students (see Table 9). One individual had never traveled internationally, while three had traveled for 2–4 weeks and the remaining three students had traveled for more than 4 weeks.

Data showed that participants expressed more positive attitudes about international travel and the importance of learning about international agriculture (see Table 10). They perceived themselves as having a better understanding of the important role international experiences can play, as well as an increased feeling of the safety of international travel.

Participants also showed increases in their perceived and actual knowledge of China, Chinese agriculture, and international agriculture in general. Increases were shown in basic knowledge of China's geography and agriculture following the trip (see Table 11). Participants also expressed an increase in self-perceived knowledge of international agriculture, and specifically to Chinese agricultural practices (see Table 12).

**Table 9. China Participants' International Experience prior to Trip**

Previous International Experience	n	%
None	1	14
1–2 weeks	3	43
2–4 weeks	0	0
More than four weeks	3	43

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**Table 10. China Participants' Attitudes about International Experiences (N = 7)**

	Percent Strongly Disagree	Percent Disagree	Percent Agree	Percent Strongly Agree
	Pre/Post	Pre/Post	Pre/Post	Pre/Post
International travel is educational.	0/0	0/0	14/0	86/100
I am excited to learn about Chinese agriculture.	0/0	0/0	29/71	71/29
I like learning about different cultures.	0/0	0/0	29/14	71/86
Knowledge of international agriculture will help me in my career.	0/0	0/0	57/29	43/71
Knowledge of international agriculture is important for all CALS students.	0/0	14/0	57/43	29/57
International experiences are an important part of CALS student activities.	0/0	0/0	43/29	57/71
I am worried about the quality of water in China.a	0/0	43/29	29/57	29/14
It is important to study information about a foreign country prior to traveling there.	0/0	0/0	29/43	71/57
I am worried about being able to communicate with people in China.a	0/0	14/57	71/29	14/14
International agriculture should be an integral part of CALS undergraduate studies.	0/0	14/0	43/29	43/71
I am worried about eating different types of foods while in China.a	0/0	43/72	29/43	29/0
I am worried about crime while in China.a	0/0	72/14	14/86	14/0
I am worried about my safety outside the United States.a	0/0	86/72	0/29	14/0
I am worried about using different currency while in China.a	0/14	72/86	29/0	0/0
It is important to speak the language of the country you will be visiting.	0/0	43/72	57/29	0/0

<sup>a</sup>Negatively worded statements.

**Table 11. China Participants Knowledge**

Question	Answer	Percent Correct
		Pre/Post
What is the primary language spoken in China?	Chinese-Mandarin	100/100
What is the capital of China?	Beijing	71/86
Where is China located?	Asia	71/100
What is the currency in China?	Yuan RMB	0/100
What percentage of exports from China are agricultural products?	9.6% GDP	0/0
What countries border China?	Mongolia, India, Vietnam, Laos, Burma, Nepal, Russia, Pakistan	71/86
What are China's primary agricultural exports?	Oil seeds	0/0
China is bordered by what two bodies of water?	Yellow Sea, China Sea, South China Sea	0/0
How many provinces are there in China?	22	0/0
Overall knowledge		35/52

**Table 12. China Participants' Self-perceived Level of Knowledge of Chinese and International Agriculture**

	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
	Pre/Post	Pre/Post	Pre/Post	Pre/Post
Knowledge of international agriculture	43/0	29/57	29/43	0/0
Knowledge of Chinese agriculture	57/0	43/71	0/29	0/0

## Summary

Based on the data collected it was concluded that participants from all three groups showed an increase in knowledge (actual and perceived) related to agriculture in the destination country and international agriculture in general. Changes in attitudes about international agricultural and international travel were mixed. Participants generally had more positive attitudes about traveling internationally, but expressed mixed attitudes about the importance of CALS students gaining international experience.

The results of these three trips would indicate that short-term study abroad experiences can be an effective pedagogical tool for increasing student knowledge of agriculture in a specific country and international agriculture in general. Changing students' attitudes

appears to be more complicated, likely due to variations in specific activities on each trip and the specific students on each trip. Educators organizing similar trips should recognize increasing knowledge might be easy; while impacting student attitudes will likely be more complex.

Regardless of the challenges to implementing international educational programs, faculty should continue to embrace these activities. The current generation of collegiate students has been raised in a culture that embraces globalization and connectedness; yet, true understanding of other cultures and practices is limited among students. International educational experiences, including both short-term and long-term travel, immerse students into a culture and offer the opportunity for application of skills and development of personal understanding of global citizenship. Zhai and Scheer (2004) noted the trend of globalization in educational institutions driven by an interdependent global community. Altbach and Knight (2007) stressed, "Internationalism will remain a central force in higher

*education, though its contours are unclear*" (p. 303). As programs and experiences continue to develop, it is imperative that methodologies be reviewed to determine the most effective means of guiding students in an international experience to build transferable skills toward their future career and role as a global citizen (Suutari, 2002).

Although the immediate impact in knowledge and attitude is a positive improvement indicated through this study, additional research is needed to determine the significant role an international experience plays in career preparation and skill development. A longitudinal study is needed to evaluate the 'global readiness' of graduates to take on their role as a global citizen (Irani et al., 2006).

Additional areas recommended for future study relating to short-term international experiences include:

- Specific methods of preparation and follow-up or reflection should be studied to determine the most effective means of gleaning quality, applicable experiences from a short-term international experience.

- Transferable skill development through various activities and immersion experiences on a short-term international educational experience.

- A comparative analysis of service-based trips versus industry tour-based experiences.

- Effectiveness of an international service experience in meeting program-specific goals or outcome measures.

- Factors that influence the change in specific attitudes towards international experience.

- The long-term impacts on students who participated in these experiences.

- Identifying best practices for conducting short-term international experiences.

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