

# Understanding Perceived Short-Term Outcomes from a Faculty Travel Abroad Experience in Ecuador



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## Abstract

In an attempt to facilitate internationalization of undergraduate curriculum, eight faculty members from a land-grant institution participated in a short-term study abroad. Upon their return from the experience, participants were asked to reflect on changes from initial attitudes or beliefs, perceived benefits gained from participation in the program, and anticipated impacts on academic activities. Responses were analyzed using four variables: knowledge gain, change in attitude, increased skills, and aspirations. Two themes emerged concerning knowledge gain: change that occurred regarding the context of the research process, specific to research opportunities and knowledge gained from travelling with a diverse faculty group, and informational details about Ecuador, specifically regarding social systems, current issues, culture, and environment. Responses concerning a change in attitude were focused on the people of Ecuador, exhibiting shifts from a stereotypical to a broader mindset. Few participants described any opportunities to increase skill sets within their post-trip reflection activity, citing only opportunities to increase communication skills. However, numerous participants cited new aspirations, focused around the three areas of land-grant academe – teaching, research, and extension. These results suggest that participating faculty aspire to integrate global activities into their on-campus courses and research endeavors as a result of participating in this program.

## Introduction

There is a growing demand for post-secondary graduates to be prepared to actively engage in a workforce that is no longer constrained by the limits of a singular custom or culture. Instead, graduates need to

be prepared for a diverse experience demonstrating a range of skills including the ability to work effectively in international settings; an awareness of and adaptability to unfamiliar cultures, major global issues, and currents of change; and a capacity for communicating across both cultural and linguistic boundaries (Brustein, 2007; Kreber, 2006). In obtaining this goal, the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC, 2004) state that universities and colleges in America “must truly be universities and colleges of the world...[internationalizing] our mission—our learning, discovery and engagement” (p. v). An internationalized mission would result in college graduates who are able to demonstrate global competence, or the ability “not only to contribute to knowledge, but also to comprehend, analyze, and evaluate its meaning in the context of an increasingly globalized world” (NASULGC, 2004, p. 2).

Globalization of the university curriculum is often addressed through strategies including study abroad opportunities, travel courses, and globally-focused courses. U.S. student participation in study abroad opportunities has more than doubled over the past decade (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2010). However, only a limited number of students are taking advantage of these opportunities as demonstrated by the 260,327 out of the approximately 15.6 million undergraduate students enrolled in higher education institutions who participated in study abroad opportunities during that time period (IIE, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Aside from study abroad opportunities, faculty members bear the greatest responsibility for providing students with exposure to international content (Russo and Osborne, 2004). A panel of professionals with

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extensive international experience recently participated in a Delphi study (Bruening and Shao, 2005). Among the results in this study, the panel indicated a belief that undergraduates greatly benefit when exposed to information presented by professionals who had worked for long periods of time in international settings, and who integrate the corresponding cultural perspectives and contexts into their course material (Bruening and Shao, 2005). At the university level, teaching faculty may be best situated to fill this role. However, in order to do so, opportunities to gain international experience must be provided to teaching faculty.

One effort to increase the international experience of faculty was provided through Teaching Locally, Engaging Globally (TLEG) project. Funded through a USDA Higher Education Challenge Grant, this project was designed to provide teaching faculty from a U.S. land-grant university with the opportunity to travel to several locations in Ecuador in order to observe their subject area in the context of a different culture. During the experiences, faculty members collected data, pictures, and videos in order to assist them in developing reusable learning objects (RLOs) and case studies for their undergraduate courses that addressed contemporary issues in agriculture from a global viewpoint. RLOs are self-contained, digital learning activities created using a standardized structure and tagged with metadata that allows for cataloging and searching (Wiley, 2000). Ranging in length from 2 to 15 minutes, RLOs can either be used individually to support presented lecture materials or multiple RLOs can be linked to create a larger lesson. RLOs can be delivered in a variety of ways including in class, through an eLearning platform (i.e. Blackboard), or on an independent web page. RLOs can contain a wide array of media, including text, web sites, charts, maps, models, PowerPoint presentations, photos, case studies, simulations, video clips, audio clips, assessments. RLOs for this project have yet to be integrated into the curriculum.

Limited research has been done to evaluate the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences that exist within global competence (Hayward, 2000; Hunter et al., 2006). Within the TLEG project, six objectives sought to identify changes for both faculty and student participants. Two of the four faculty-specific objectives indicated that participation in the program would result in the development of both favorable attitudes and enhanced knowledge of Latin American culture and global aspects of the respective discipline. Research was needed to better understand how participation in the TLEG project may have contributed to the development of global competence.

Rockwell and Bennett's (2004) Targeting Outcomes of Programs (TOP) model was used to frame a study of the outcomes from the TLEG project. The TOP model outlines seven levels of outcomes for a program: resources, activities, participation, reactions, KASA (knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations), practices, and SEE (social, economic, and environmental) outcomes. Evaluation of learning outcomes, rather than program implementation outcomes, begins at the KASA level. Knowledge change seeks to identify whether participation in the program increased awareness, understanding, and/or problem solving abilities of the participants, while shifts in attitude are determined by change in outlooks, perspectives, or viewpoints (Rockwell and Bennett, 2004). Change in skills is determined through an improvement in abilities or performance, or with the development of new skills, while aspirations are gauged by examining participant ambitions, hopes or desires following participation (Rockwell and Bennett, 2004). According to Rockwell and Bennett (2004) these short-term KASA outcomes are necessary for changes in practice, behavior, or conditions to occur.

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the short-term outcomes that teaching faculty amassed following an international experience. Specifically, the study sought to describe the changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations that participating faculty members from the University of Florida experienced following their participation in the TLEG trip to the country of Ecuador.

## Methods

A basic qualitative research design was conducted for this study (Merriam, 1998). The researchers framed the TLEG project based on the assumption that learning occurs in complex social environments where learners actively construct meaning by reflecting on their experiences (Bandura, 1997; Kolb, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978). In this study, faculty participants are the learners, a trip to Ecuador was the experience, and learning was operationalized as short-term KASA outcomes which would be manifested in the reflective activities immediately following their return to the U.S.

The application process for the travel portion of the grant was presented to faculty throughout the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALs), with selection being based on personal interest in Latin America and the desire to integrate an international perspective from these countries into their courses. The activities undertaken in this study were approved by the University of Florida Institutional Review Board

and signed informed consent was obtained from all participants. Faculty who participated in this study (N = 8) represented eight different departments: Agricultural and Biological Engineering; Agricultural Education and Communication; Agronomy; Family, Youth, and Community Science; Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences; Food Science and Human Nutrition; Religion; and Wildlife Ecology and Conservation. These participants travelled to Ecuador in July 2010 with members of the research team. The research team was made up of four faculty members from the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication at University of Florida, as well as two faculty members from the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, & Communication at Texas A&M University.

The 14-day trip included visits to three culturally and geographically different regions of Ecuador. The trip began with four days in the coastal tropics in and around the city of Guayaquil. Guayaquil is a major port city in Ecuador with a population of over 3 million. While in this region, participants interacted with faculty at Escuela Superior Politécnica del Litoral (ESPOL) University, visited an aquaculture research station, toured a residential farmer-training program, and experienced some of the cultural aspects of the city.

The second part of the trip was a four-day stay in the Andes highlands, in the isolated, 1000 person village of Salinas de Guaranda. During the day-long trip from Guayaquil to Salinas, the group made several stops to observe local agricultural practices. The central economic and cultural feature of Salinas is a cooperative called Salinerito. While in Salinas, participants stayed in a hotel managed by the cooperative and were able to interact with the local people. The participants toured many sites in and around Salinas including the cooperative, various agricultural operations, and a neighboring village's health clinic.

The group then traveled back to Guayaquil to fly out to the Galapagos Islands, a World Heritage Site. This portion of the trip included four days touring a wide variety of ecological sites and conservation programs. Participants stayed in a hotel on the island of Santa Cruz and traveled to other islands by boat. The group returned to Guayaquil for an overnight stay and then departed for the U.S.

Following their return, each participant was asked via e-mail to complete a reflection activity which consisted of seven open-ended questions. Three questions asked participants to state attitudes and beliefs as they were held following the travel experience, three questions asked participants to articulate the KASA

changes that they noticed from their reflection activity to the reflection activity, and one question asked for feedback on improving the travel experience for other faculty members. For the purposes of this article, the three questions which specifically addressed aspects of change from reflection to reflection were analyzed in order to identify the short-term outcomes cited by the participants. The questions asked, and responses of which were analyzed, were:

1. Did your experience change your initial attitudes/beliefs about participating in an international experience? Please specifically describe any changes that may have occurred;
2. Please describe any benefits you may have gained from participating in this international experience;
3. How do you think your participation in this international experience may or may not impact your future international teaching, research, and extension activities? Responses for each of the three questions were received from all participants.

The data from the reflection exercises were sorted into emergent themes using the constant comparative method of data analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), which uses bits of data compared to others in order to identify similarities and differences which may be present (Merriam, 1998). Two of the researchers independently coded the data, then confirmed and revised the initial findings using procedures outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Unlike the reliability and validity measures common within a quantitative study, qualitative studies rely on building confidence in the findings through methods which increase trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness of the study was increased through the use of member checks, triangulation, and an audit trail (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

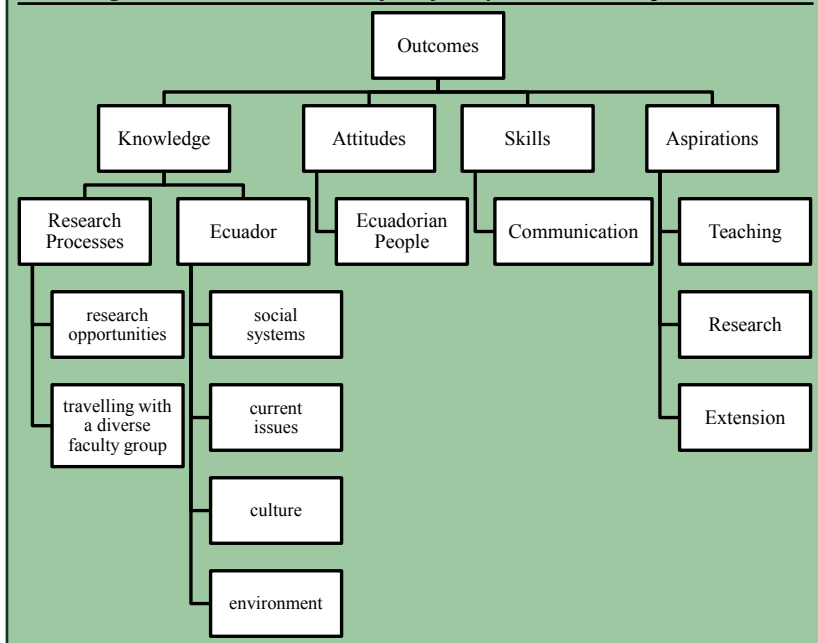
## Results

Participants were asked to identify changes from their initial attitudes or beliefs, perceived benefits gained from participation in the program, and anticipated impacts on academic activities. Four variables were utilized during the analysis: knowledge gain, change in attitude, increased skills, and aspirations. Themes and sub-themes have been italicized for emphasis. For a summary of these findings, see Figure 1.

Seven of the eight participants cited a change in knowledge. Two themes emerged from the variable knowledge gain. One theme focused around the change that occurred regarding the context of the research process while the second was centered on details specific to Ecuador. Within the research

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Figure 1. Short-term outcomes from faculty international experiences



process theme, the two sub-themes that emerged were research opportunities and the knowledge gained from travelling with a diverse faculty group. Two participants specifically commented on a change in knowledge regarding various areas of research potential ranging from collaboration and location possibilities to shifts in research focus from content to social context, commenting that the trip provided “a grand view of what’s available in Ecuador in terms of working partnerships and locations and issues.” Furthermore, two participants described the knowledge gained from engaging with a diverse faculty group, citing the opportunity to learn about content from multiple disciplinary angles, the dynamics of international group work, and the research focus of fellow faculty members.

Within the Ecuador theme, four sub-themes emerged: social systems, current issues, culture, and environment. Three participants commented on the role of various systems within the social context observed over the course of the trip. Specifically, these participants cited the use of a local food system to create economic opportunity within a community, the impact of the Catholic Church on the social system of Salinas, and the nuances of how systems such as Liberation Theology and social change occur at the local level. One participant stated that “this trip helped me understand more nuances about how systems...and social change occur on the ground.”

Two participants identified current issues they learned of during the trip. One participant noted the existence of a range of environmental issues. The second participant observed the commonalities between rural Ecuador and the rural U.S., stating, “many of the

same problems that rural Ecuador faces are the problems that rural America faces – youth leaving rural areas for the cities, trying to balance ‘agriculture’ and the ‘environment,’ and maintaining a sense of community.”

Three participants remarked about the cultural knowledge gained over the course of the trip. One participant commented on gaining a better understanding of the Ecuadorian culture through conversations with people on the road or during meals. Another participant, in comparing this trip to previous trips within Latin American, noted observing an evident difference between the indigenous cultures of Ecuador and other indigenous cultures. A third participant, who described having a greater understanding both of the people and culture in Ecuador and the diversity within the country, also stated that “I really didn’t have much of a perspective on Latin American culture prior to the trip...In this experience, I think we saw the ‘feature movie’ of a country vs the ‘snapshots’ we get from most travel experiences.”

Two participants specifically mentioned knowledge gained about the environmental conditions in Ecuador. One participant learned about the ecological and marine systems of Ecuador as well as the regional differences in agriculture throughout the country. The second participant described a shift in beliefs about the climate in Ecuador when commenting, “I was most surprised about the climate and the terrain on the Galapagos Islands, where I expected it to be warm and more tropical. It was cool and almost semi-arid.”

Five of the eight participants, in their post-trip reflection activity, cited a change in attitude. The variable change in attitude centered on regard of the Ecuadorian people. Five participants each commented in various ways on their changed perspective that occurred as a result of this trip. One participant commented on how the experience of engaging with Ecuadorians changed “my views and my schema from the stereotypical Latin Americans as ‘dramatic’... and aggressive ...to even-keeled and calm, as well as polite and meek (and enormously accommodating and kind).” Two participants cited a gain in appreciation for the social and cultural diversity within the region. One participant recounted the change in perspective that occurred upon hearing from locals in Salinas about the perceived favoritism that occurs at the hand of the church, stating “the church has done a lot for the town,

*but hearing another 'side' to the story was interesting and did revise my beliefs.*" A fifth participant described how the perceived poverty of the nation had previously limited the desire for engagement relative to other Latin American countries, but that this experience had now provided the opportunity to see the value in working with these communities.

Only two of the eight participants described any opportunities to increase skill sets within their post-trip reflection activity. The variable change in skills was only related to changes in communication skills. One participant described taking advantage of the opportunities within this trip both to "*adjust to a new culture...and [to] attempt to practice respectful inquiry into...the places that I visited.*" A second participant commented on the opportunity that this trip provided for practicing the Spanish language, affording the opportunity to learn new words.

Six of the eight participants cited new aspirations within their post-trip reflection activity. The variable aspiration was composed of three themes focused around the three areas of land-grant academe – teaching, research, and extension. Half of the participants specifically described their aspirations for integrating this experience into the undergraduate classroom, such as utilizing specific case studies created from this trip to discuss concepts often taught in an abstract manner, incorporating RLOs from the trip into the classroom, and locating a textbook which provides students with a global, cross-cultural perspective. Others noted a desire to develop student study abroad programs in Ecuador, stating an "*increased confidence regarding my ability to promote international experiences for our students and perhaps becoming involved in organizing such experiences.*" Within the research theme, two participants specifically commented on new research aspirations regarding partnership, location and topic possibilities both in Ecuador and with University of Florida faculty who also participated in this trip. Two participants cited how involvement in this trip had changed their vision of working in Florida Extension, specifically in creating international exchanges with contacts in Ecuador for both Florida Extension personnel and 4-H youth as well as learning Spanish to better engage the Spanish-speaking population in Florida.

### **Conclusions and Discussions**

This project was specifically designed for faculty within colleges of agricultural and life science. The themes delineated from the data were a result of the experience which had been orchestrated specifically to address the disciplinary backgrounds of the faculty

participants. However, faculty participants also gained valuable new insight as a result of this experience, discovering ways to explore research questions through new collaborations and varying cultural lenses.

When planning an international experience for faculty members, it is important to recognize the potential for interaction within the group. By bringing together faculty from various backgrounds, participants gained an appreciation for other disciplines outside their own. This collaboration has the potential to stimulate novel and creative ventures among faculty who may have not had the opportunity to do so otherwise (Gillespie et al., 2010). Likewise, the merit in identifying potential partnerships across borders is valuable (Gillespie et al., 2010).

It is also important when planning an international trip to have participants recognize their own beliefs about the proposed location and peoples they will interact with. One particular theme, Ecuadorian people, seems to suggest that while most faculty participants indicated a change in perspective, most also entered into the project with fairly narrow viewpoints of the people of Ecuador. Some participants noted a shift from a stereotypical viewpoint as a direct result of their personal interactions with Ecuadorians. When individuals have an opportunity to consider their relationship to an experience prior to engaging in that experience then the change becomes much clearer (Kolb, 1984). Furthermore, participants must be ensured time during the course of the trip to interact with local delegates both professionally and socially, allowing the trip to move beyond a simple site-seeing tour.

A main objective of the TLEG project focused on how participants envision themselves using this travel experience to further their work in a U.S. land-grant institution. The three themes focused centrally around the land grant mission and included teaching, research and extension. From a teaching viewpoint, faculty participants' desire to continue to promote international experiences for undergraduates supports the positive effect of the experience. Using contextual applications of the experience to bring to life the various abstract ideas found in many content areas is also a novel approach to teaching. Future travel opportunities should build on the potential of this collaborative, contextual approach in the hopes that the act of collaboration will aid participants in being more creative and insightful as they explore ways to make their experience beneficial for their students.

Faculty participants also demonstrated an increased knowledge in the research process. The research theme showed that faculty participants

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were more of aware of multi-disciplinary, multi-cultural opportunities. Reinforcing aspirations for this type of collaboration becomes a challenge with limited support from departments (Dewey and Duff, 2009). Therefore, when planning this type of travel opportunity, it is crucial to integrate opportunities to discuss and engage in collaborative efforts upon return, either through frequent meetings or facilitated research-based discussions. Within the TLEG project, faculty participants met formally on four different occasions to debrief about the trip, as well as to discuss RLO development and cultural integration into the undergraduate classroom. Research regarding student response to RLO implementation is currently being conducted.

Finally, the extension theme focused on the perceptions of faculty regarding parallel extension opportunities in both the U.S. and Ecuador. Extension opportunities mentioned involved working with Spanish-speaking populations as well as youth development programs. While a central focus of the TLEG project involves the impact of this experience on presented information in the undergraduate classroom, it is difficult to deny the potential influence that this type of international experience can have on the many facets of a faculty member's academic appointment.

## Summary

The 14-day trip to the country of Ecuador impacted faculty participants in a variety of ways, operationalized as changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations (see Figure 1). Participants expressed changes in knowledge about research opportunities in Ecuador and opportunities to collaborate with other participants. Participants also conveyed changes in knowledge about social systems, current issues, and environmental conditions of Ecuador. Faculty on the trip indicated changes in attitudes about the people of Ecuador. Participants also noted changes in communication skills, both in terms of Spanish language skills and cultural competency. The experience also changed aspirations of participants, built around all three missions of the Land Grant university. Faculty aspired to change their teaching by developing study-abroad programs, integrating global activities into their on-campus courses, and adopting culturally sensitive textbooks. In terms of research, faculty aspired to develop new partnerships, conduct research in new locations, and research new topics. When thinking about their extension roles, faculty aspired to use their new contacts in Ecuador to facilitate exchanges and to improve their own interaction with Spanish-speaking people in the U.S.

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