

# An Intrinsic Case Study of a Post-Secondary High-Impact Field Experience

**Holli R. Leggette<sup>1</sup>**  
**Texas A&M University**  
**College Station, TX**

**Caroline Black<sup>2</sup>**  
**Jaemor Farms**  
**Alto, GA**

**Billy R. McKim<sup>3</sup>, Debbie Prince<sup>4</sup>**  
**Texas A&M University**  
**College Station, TX**

**Shannon Lawrence<sup>5</sup>**  
**Clemson University**  
**Clemson, SC**

## Abstract

This qualitative case study focused on an eight-day field experience course developed using Kolb's model of experiential learning (1984) and guided by the Knowles et al. (2005) theory of adult learning. The field experience encouraged students to embrace their education by developing as an individual, inquiring into the unknown or misunderstood and exploring unfamiliar environments. Thirteen undergraduate students and one graduate student were exposed to cultures and beliefs not necessarily familiar or similar to their own. Cohort members reflected multiple times during the course. Data were analyzed using qualitative methods to reveal the impacts of the experiential learning instances of the experience. Seven major themes were revealed in students' reflections: emotion, service, culture, barriers/risk, professionalism, career and desire to know. As educators, it is important to look at opportunities to incorporate both small- and large-scale field experiences into course curriculum. The emphasis on study abroad programs is evident at many universities and, in some

cases, overshadows the unique experiences that could occur during a domestic study away. Thus, it is important that educators do not overlook the opportunities for high-impact learning to occur within the bounds of the United States.

## Introduction

College students are "discovery-based" learners (Brown, 2000, p. 5); however, discovery-based learning experiences in agricultural education are not a new concept. For decades, traditional and non-traditional agricultural education has used the application of knowledge in hands-on settings (Barrick, 1989) in both pedagogy and andragogy settings. The principle of andragogy, as proposed by Knowles et al. (2005), posits adult learners must know the why, what and how of learning, which will likely motivate them to engage in the learning process. Richardson (1994) found that adult learners believe "a well-planned program delivery system that includes opportunities to see, experience and

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Lecturer, Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications, 265B AGLS Mail Stop 2116; Tel: 979-845-2954; Email: holli.leggette@agnet.tamu.edu

<sup>2</sup>Agritourism Coordinator, Jaemor Farms, 5340 Cornelia Hwy. Alto, GA 30510; Tel: 706-248-3402; Email: caroline@jaemorfarms.com

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications, 267 AGLS Mail Stop 2116; Tel: 979-845-0794; Email: brmckim@tamu.edu

<sup>4</sup>Former undergraduate student, Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications, Mail Stop 2116; Tel: 936-355-0513; Email: debbieprince12@gmail.com

<sup>5</sup>Lecturer, Department of Agricultural Education, SAFES College, 253 McAdams; Tel: 864-656-5675; Email: sglawre@clemson.edu

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discuss should greatly enhance the learning process” (para. 1).

For a higher level of learning to occur, observations, thoughts and experiences (Boud et al., 1985a) should be combined to reinforce a meaningful learning environment. Kolb (1984) claimed that a process grounded in concrete experience and enhanced by reflection is experiential learning, which occurs when new experiences and perspectives encourage new ways of thinking and performing (Cullingford, 1990). This style of learning takes place anywhere a student focuses on a subject, is challenged through an action, receives support and feedback from others and reflects or debriefs on the experience (Joplin, 1981; Roberts, 2006). Experiential learning, which some argue (Baker and Robinson, 2011; Knobloch, 2003; Roberts, 2006) is the foundation of secondary agricultural education, is a key component in facilitating achievement of educational outcomes (Roberts, 2006). However, experiential learning does not occur haphazardly.

Texas A&M University’s College of Agricultural and Life Sciences has emphasized the need to provide experiential learning opportunities through field experiences and to engage students in diverse, cultural experiences that provide them with innovative learning experiences and empower them to serve and lead (Sams, 2010). Innovative learning experiences enable students to expand their foundation of knowledge and embrace “learning as a lifelong process” (Hickcox, 2002, p. 124) by linking their academic and personal lives to the experiences they encounter during the field experience (Jakubowski, 2003). Field experiences challenge students and faculty members to interact beyond the classroom and immerse themselves in opportunities that require critical thinking (Hickcox, 2002) and create a learning environment that includes experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and academic rigor (Washor and Mojkowski, 2007).

Therefore, implementation and preparation of field experience curriculum needs to be developed in a way that ensures rigorous content is applied throughout the course (Daggett, 2005). Winston et al. (1994) defined rigor as “an environment that is intellectually challenging and demanding” (p. 12). Challenges in professional and real-life events help students learn to use their full range of talents and abilities (Matusevich et al., 2009). Students accept greater responsibility when in rigorous learning environments, which can result in lifelong learners (Matusevich et al., 2009). Academic rigor is not simply grades, memorization and regurgitation; rather academic rigor encompasses critical thinking, high standards and expectations and cognitive development (Graham and Essex, 2001). Washor and Mojkowski

(2007) stated “*rigorous experience is reflective and intimate. A rigorous project causes students to take some type of action, to develop their own questions, to observe and retain key information and to realize how hard it is to do something well*” (p. 85).

## Conceptual Framework

Kolb’s model of experiential learning (1984) and Knowles et al. (2005) theory of adult learning as well as relevant literature (e.g., Hickcox, 2002; Blackburn, 2008; Matusevich et al., 2009) served as a foundation for the development of a post-secondary, high-impact field experience at Texas A&M University. Learning through experience and forming opinions based on the experience are gateways through which knowledge is created (Kolb, 1984). Students can begin the experiential learning cycle by thinking and making an abstract hypothesis about the topic, which often occurs in the traditional classroom environment (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning provides students opportunities to actively test the knowledge gained through hypothesis testing (Kolb, 1984), theory and lecture (Bringle and Hatcher, 1999), which builds a foundation for deep learning. “*Anytime a person learns, he [or she] must ‘experience’ the subject—significantly identify with, seriously interact with, form a personal relationship with [the subject].*” (Joplin, 1981, p. 17). Although students attend class and learn skills, many times they do not have the opportunity to experience the subject until their career because of lack of resources, time and logistics.

Experience unremittably changes learning and modifies students’ thought processes (Kolb, 1984). However, “... experience alone is not the key to learning” (Boud et al., 1985b, p. 7). Experience must be followed by thorough reflection of the experience to complete the experiential learning cycle (Boud et al., 1985b; Kolb, 1984). Knowles et al. (2005) and Lamm et al. (2011) suggested students should be given different types of reflection and learning opportunities to accommodate a variety of learners. Students can strengthen their understanding of concepts through reflection (Boud et al., 1985b; Kolb, 1984), which is the preferred method of learning enhancement by adult learners (Richardson, 1994).

Furthermore, Knowles et al. (2005) theory of adult learning is defined as “the process of adults gaining knowledge and expertise” (p. 174) through self-directed learning opportunities, which do not require an instructor or a classroom because learning can occur independently during daily life (Knowles et al., 2005; Merriam, 2001). Adult learning posits that adults learn experientially, learn as problem solvers and learn best when the topic is of immediate value to them (Knowles et al., 2005;

Merriam, 2001). Knowles et al. (2005) stated that adults should be engaged in the development of their own learning experiences, which Merriam (2001) referred to as self-directed learning. In addition, it is probable that adult learners may be highly confident and self-directed in one domain of learning, but dependent and hesitant about another (Knowles et al., 2005; Pratt, 1988). Lamm et al. (2011) confirmed that adult learners would rather participate in experiential learning activities and develop new ideas and opinions using an experiential approach.

### **Purpose**

To provide a more rigorous curriculum offering, five members of the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications at Texas A&M University designed, developed and implemented an andragogical experiential learning based field experience to expose students to cultures and beliefs that were not necessarily familiar or similar to their own. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to describe the andragogical experiential learning based field experience from multiple perspectives and to reveal the impacts of the experiential learning during the experience.

### **Context of the Study**

The experience was designed as an eight-day immersion excursion that included travel through the Midwest to the National FFA Convention. Students who participated in the experience had the opportunity to engage in new experiences and interact with unfamiliar people and situations. The students were treated as self-directed learners (Knowles et al., 2005; Merriam, 2001) participating in an experiential learning process (Kolb, 1984; Roberts, 2006). The assistant professor and graduate teaching/research assistants assumed the roles of facilitators of learning as described by Knowles et al. (2005) and Merriam (2001).

The field experience began with two informational meetings about potential stops, application steps, course requirements and cost. Interested students submitted a one-page letter of application to explain why they wanted to participate in the experience, what they hoped to gain from the experience and how the experience could help them reach both short- and long-term career goals. The letters were reviewed separately and as a cohort to choose a cohort that represented the goals of the field experience. In addition to the application letter, students were required to have a minimum grade point average of 2.5, attend formal class meetings before and after the field experience and pay all costs associated with the experience. About one-half of the students who participated in the experience had been involved in FFA and one student had served as an Area FFA Officer in

Texas. Additionally, two of the students had participated in the CDE that he/she assisted with at National FFA Convention. None of the students had participated in a similar field experience and only two had participated in any type of field experience while studying at Texas A&M University. Further, 12 of the 13 undergraduates had achieved at least sophomore standing and about half of them had never traveled outside of Texas.

On Sunday, October 16, 2011, at 7 a.m., a cohort of 13 undergraduate students, one graduate student, two graduate teaching/research assistants, one Fulbright Scholar and one assistant professor began the field experience in two 15-passenger vans. After traveling ten hours, the cohort stopped at Joplin, Missouri, to view the destruction caused by the May 22, 2011, tornado. For two hours, students walked among the wreckage, took photographs and notes and visited with residents. The cohort continued to Columbia, Missouri, where members spent the second day with a Regional Extension Specialist from the University of Missouri and interacted with members of the Amish and Mennonite communities in Central Missouri. Students visited with the Amish and Mennonites, asked questions about their culture and observed a local produce auction. Throughout the field experience, students observed primitive and modern agriculture practices and experienced cultural practices different from their own.

Day three the cohort traveled to Moline, Illinois, to tour the John Deere World Headquarters and Seeder Manufacturing Facility. The tour of the seeder facility gave students an overview of the history of John Deere and an inside look at the production of the seeder units. The field experience continued to Indianapolis, Indiana, where the cohort spent the fourth, fifth and sixth days assisting with the National FFA Convention. Students helped with the National Agricultural Mechanics, Agricultural Communications and Food Science and Technology Career Development Events (CDEs); interacted with FFA students at Texas A&M University's recruitment booth; attended the opening ceremony; visited the career fair to network and learn more about job opportunities in their desired fields and participated in the National Collegiate FFA Convention events. For some students, it was their first experience with CDEs and the National FFA Convention.

The cohort left Indianapolis on October 21, 2011 and stopped in St. Louis, Missouri, to develop nighttime photography skills at the St. Louis Gateway Arch. Day seven the students returned to tour the Arch, take daytime photos and visit and interact with the designers and builders of the structure. After the Arch tour, travels continued to Boonville, Missouri, for a tour of the Anheuser-Busch Clydesdale breeding farm. Students

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took photos of the farm and asked questions of the Clydesdale caretakers. On the last day, October 23, 2011, the cohort stopped at the Oklahoma City Bombing Memorial. Many students in the group were too young to remember or were unaware of the history of the Oklahoma City Bombing. Students toured the site where the Murrah Federal Building once stood and interacted with park rangers who described the bombing and its effect on the community.

The cohort arrived home at 8 p.m., which concluded the field experience portion of the course. Together, the cohort traveled more than 3,000 miles in two 15-passenger vans during eight days, visited five land grant institutions (University of Missouri, Lincoln University, Oklahoma State University, Langston University and University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), volunteered at National FFA Convention and toured seven United States' landmarks, communities or facilities. Additionally, students reflected (Boud et al., 1985b; Knowles et al., 2005; Kolb, 1984; Lamm et al., 2011) throughout the field experience (during the application process, before and after each stop on the trip and final reflection (one to three pages) within one week after the trip). Students were also asked to submit ten photos (see Figure 1) that were indicative of their experience and their final projects.

After returning, students were required to schedule individual meetings with the assistant professor and/or graduate teaching/research assistants to discuss their final project. A group of four agricultural leadership students returned to campus to reestablish a collegiate FFA chapter, compose a detailed two-year plan of action and develop an outline for establishing the chapter based on the knowledge gained through theory, lecture (Bringle and Hatcher, 1999) and hypothesis testing (Kolb, 1984). Nine agricultural communications students tested their knowledge gained through coursework by writing and designing a three-page layout and feature story about a tour of their choice. The assistant professor and graduate teaching/research assistants hosted six three-hour work nights to assist students with their final projects and individual follow-up meetings were offered if requested. Students were also required to attend a follow-up class meeting for final presentations and an after-action roundtable discussion with department faculty members on December 9, 2011.

## Methods

The purpose of most qualitative research is "... to describe, understand and interpret and not to test hypotheses" (Lichtman, 2006, p. 105). Many approaches to inductive research strategies exist including ethnography, grounded theory and case study (Dooley,

2007). "*Ethnography refers to a systematic description of a culture that is based on direct observation of a particular group*" (Lichtman, 2006, p. 63), generally over a prolonged period of time (Cresswell, 2007). We first considered ethnography as an approach to this study; however, we determined approaching this study as a case study was more appropriate because we believed the 16-week duration of a semester was not sufficiently prolonged for us to fully understand the ethnographic implications of the students we studied. Although this study did not meet the strictest definitions of ethnographic research, it drew several parallels to ethnographic research because "*like ethnography, case study data collection involves a wide array of procedures as the researcher builds an in-depth picture of the case*" (Cresswell, 2007, p.132).

The case study approach to qualitative research explores a bounded system, collecting in-depth data from multiple sources of information (Cresswell, 2007). "Observations usually occur in settings that already exist, rather than in contrived settings" (Lichtman, 2006, p. 137); hence, case study researchers typically "...*try not to disturb the ordinary activity, not even to test, not even to interview, if we can get the information we want by discrete observation or examination of records*" (Stake, 1995, p. 12).

Data collection processes began after receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (Protocol Number: IRB2013-0109) and followed the requirements and specifications set forth in the approval notice. Data were collected using a wide array of procedures to build an in-depth picture from multiple sources of information (Cresswell, 2007). As Stake (1995) recommended, we attempted not to disturb students' ordinary activities during the field experience. To complement observation, qualitative researchers often use existing documents to gather information including student journals and reflections (Lichtman, 2006). Therefore, data collected through documents, participant observation, direct observation and photographic artifacts were used to describe, understand and interpret the experiences of the students involved in the field experience.

Observations occurred during the fall 2011 semester by four participant observers and one direct observer: One male assistant professor participant observer; two graduate teaching/research assistants participant observers, one male and one female; and one female undergraduate student participant observer. The direct observer was a female graduate teaching/research assistant who did not participate in the field experience but observed the on-campus activities and interacted with participants.

To increase confidence in our interpretation, methodological triangulation was approached using participant observation and direct observation, which was followed by review of artifacts (written reflections and photographs) to meet the "...obligation to minimize misrepresentation and misunderstanding" (Stake, 1995, p.109). Written artifacts were collected at the beginning of the semester and after returning from the trip. Photographic artifacts were collected near the conclusion of the semester and were included because "*visual images are central to our culture and communication. They provide another avenue of meaning. They represent a kind of reality captured by the researcher*" (see Lichtman, 2006, p. 149). Observations occurred through various lenses (i.e., undergraduate student, graduate student and faculty) and both written and photographic artifacts were also analyzed through various lenses.

Analyses began by organizing the data by type (reflections, notes, photos, projects) and numbering the pages and photos by participant. We first reviewed the data individually, making notes during the process and forming initial codes from patterned regularities in the data (Creswell, 2007). Then as a group, we aggregated the data into categories, which were collapsed into seven themes through direct interpretation and presented in the results. Member checks were conducted throughout the research process and a draft of the results was reviewed by participants to confirm the accuracy of the findings.

### Results

Seven major themes were revealed in students' reflections: emotion, service, culture, barriers/risks, professionalism, career and the desire to know. Some themes were dominant; whereas, others were more subtle.

#### Emotion

Students experienced a variety of emotions: anger, sadness, pride, excitement, disappointment, passion, loneliness, happiness, closeness and anxiety. Students did not expect to encounter widespread devastation in Joplin, especially months after the tornado. "*These people [Joplin residents] have lost everything, except for their hope. I am inspired by them and visiting these [two] places truly put my life and all the things that I have been blessed with into perspective.*" These feelings sometimes led to inner turmoil and challenged the students to think critically about what they believed to be true about themselves, their culture and others. "*My thoughts [about Joplin] were challenged to the point of confusion. How could we live in the greatest country on earth when our very neighbors are living without electricity, running water and homes in complete disaster?*"

Although we could argue that immersion in a profoundly devastated area such as Joplin should arouse numerous emotions, we did not expect the range of emotions, scenes of tranquility and peace students had. The stops that produced the most varied and evidential emotions were the products of devastation: Joplin and Oklahoma City. Months after the Joplin tornado, widespread destruction was still evident and was compared to a war zone by a student who was also a veteran. Although we cannot suggest that all students will retain these memories for the remainder of their lives, some did mention they would "always remember" the devastation-produced sites.

#### Service

Students participated in small acts of altruism and large-scale organized service efforts and they wrote messages to Joplin on the Wall of Hope. "*Seeing all the destruction and devastation in real life just made me want to help all the people.*" In addition, students reflected on the devastation in Joplin and on good and bad stories they heard from survivors: people helping rebuild their community, a firefighter caught stealing from a home that had been destroyed and the "slightly jaded view of broadcast journalism" as a result of the media "forgetting" the victims. Service opportunities also gave students a chance to learn about one another. While in Indianapolis, students collected unused lunches from the CDEs to distribute to homeless people they met the day before. One student was grateful that another student had an altruistic idea to donate the wasted food to homeless people and learn about those living on the Indianapolis streets. "[We can't] always assume the worst when we see people in a position like Jake [a homeless man]."

Additionally, students realized the amount of work that goes into coordinating the National FFA CDEs and developed respect for those individuals who work to make the events happen. Service activities helped the students develop a sense of pride about themselves, their effort, their country and their school. Students' service at the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences' National FFA Convention student recruitment booth showed visitors the welcoming and inclusive educational setting of Texas A&M University. While working at the recruitment booth, students had a chance to teach others about the university's spirit and tradition.

#### Culture

The field experience enabled students to experience American cultures and United States' subcultures: agriculture, youth conventions, Texas A&M University, Texas, history, shock/displacement, minority and

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diversity. The most commented on subculture was the Amish in central Missouri. Many students had prior knowledge of Amish lifestyle, which reached as far back as students' elementary school classes, but most of the reflections about the Amish farmers' appearance were stereotypical. Students quickly realized their stereotypical assumptions were "blatantly wrong" (Bunch et al., 2011, p. 91). As the students compared their values to the Amish values that guide work, dating, family, education and communication, introspection was evident.

One female student stated, *"There are a few moments that seem to take your breath away and challenge your previous beliefs as an individual..."* when referring to the Amish, Joplin and Oklahoma City Bombing.

One student said that visiting with the Amish and Mennonites challenged her views of the world: *"This man [Amish man] was unlike anyone I had ever seen in real life before. He had a full, snow-white beard that mimicked that of Santa Claus but wore a ragged straw hat. His clothes were very clearly homemade and decorated with patchwork from years of wear and tear. Despite his abnormal appearance, after talking to him for a few minutes, he sounded like any other farmer I had ever talked to. He spoke a lot about the weather and this year's hay and corn crops..."*

As students spent more time in the Amish and Mennonite communities, students' comfort levels increased. Students had a chance to visit with the Amish and Mennonite community members about their businesses, which was considered valuable by the students. One student clearly articulated,

*"I felt a state of shock and awe when we first stopped at one of the farms ... I previously believed the Amish lived a very dull and excluded life. I thought that they were stuck in this lifestyle because they didn't know any better. What I realized is that I didn't know any better."*

Comparison with common life instances allowed for understanding by the students as witnessed by the participant observer. Although numerous fields were passed where GPS-guided combines and tractors worked side-by-side, the dichotomy that exists in agriculture was accentuated during the Amish and Mennonite tour, according to observations. *"I am immersed in technology every day by using cell phones, cars, computers, satellite TV, etc., so to see those families functioning just fine, if not better than I do, without technology was eye opening."* Some students saw the advantages to being self-sufficient but knew they would choose to use technology if given a choice.

Experiencing the different cultures was often focal points of the student reflections. The culture that emerges after devastation to an area is not easily

duplicated unless tragedy strikes. Students did not want people to experience destruction but realized that life can go on despite daunting circumstances as viewed by the participant observer.

Furthermore, according to an observer, interacting with people who are very committed to their beliefs and who make conscious choices to abstain from practices considered normal by the majority of people in society gave students the chance for deep thought about the essentials of life. *"Visiting the Amish definitely showed me that I have to embrace the differences of another culture, religion and lifestyle."*

### Barriers/Risks

The students on this trip battled the barriers and ideas that confronted them before and during the application process. However, during the experience, several students changed their minds. One said, *"I went into this trip not really knowing what to expect but was completely blown away by what I was exposed to."* The participant observers observed that students risked venturing into uncomfortable territory and culture during the experience. Students feared the unknown, failure and traveling with people they did not know, yet one student was "very eager to explore [a] part of the U.S. that I have never been to," which was believed to be worth the risk.

*"Deciding on attending the trip, I admit, I was scatter brained, unorganized and very last minute on making my decision. Little did I know that the places, the people, the sights, the history and the passions, the difference and similarities of each facet would not only give a piece of themselves, but also take a piece of me with them."*

Each student risked leaving Texas A&M University's familiar surroundings and a week of class to participate in unfamiliar situations. Throughout the experience students broke their barriers and learned "that it is fun to try and experience new things."

### Professionalism

While in Indianapolis, students recognized the benefit and importance of group dynamics. One student said in her reflection *"We were able to joke with each other, encourage one another and still get work done at the same time."* Students learned the importance of communication and co-existing with their peers as they explored and volunteered at the National FFA Convention. Students were held to a high standard with great expectations. One student stated her appreciation for the knowledge she gained from volunteering with a CDE.

*"I learned about professionalism and how to handle somewhat high-stress situations."* Additionally, students developed professional viewpoints by witnessing the

destruction in Joplin, Missouri. *“Touring the wreckage and visiting with the people who were affected by the tornado was by far the most relative real-world experience [Joplin].”*

### Career

This field experience provided several opportunities for students to discover a variety of careers, meet potential employers at the National FFA Career Show and open students’ eyes to the agricultural industry. One student claimed, *“I learned so much about agribusiness by touring the John Deere headquarters and the Budweiser Clydesdale breeding farm and definitely saw some future employment opportunities in both of those locations.”* Whereas, another student made it her goal to *“meet with employers and ask their opinions on my [her] career focused goals.”*

Additionally, students realized that they gained specific career experience and ideas. For example, one student wrote in her reflection that

*“Stopping in Joplin allowed us the opportunity to take “news story” type photos and get hands-on, on-the-scene interview experience with the residents. As a journalism student, it was admittedly a little disappointing to see how the media has backed away from covering this [Joplin] tragedy.”*

After the National FFA Convention, a student reflected that she now has *“an idea of what career I would like to pursue.”* Because of the connections and networks established during this field experience, one student accepted a summer internship, one accepted a full-time position in Texas and another student’s layout and story from the experience was accepted for publication in Drive magazine.

### Desire to Know

The final theme discovered in the reflections and observed on the trip was the students desire to know. The term know in this theme is defined as students seeking life direction, personal growth, inquired concepts and ideas experienced and immersion to increase awareness. One student reflected, *“I think that it is important for students to have high impact experiences outside of the classroom to supplement material learned in the classroom.”* Students believed the trip *“sparked their interest in learning”* and provided them the opportunity to *“form my [their] own opinions... and see with my [their] own eyes something that the majority of the people in this world will never get to see.”* Through seeking greater knowledge, students grew personally and made connections to previous knowledge and experience as witnessed by a participant observer. For example, after visiting the Gateway Arch, one student noted,

*“I have always been a huge history person, so hearing about the history in the creation of this national landmark, how they built it and the purpose of it symbolized the ‘gateway to the west.’ On top of all of the history that I was soaking up, the one time a year that the men who built the arch came to the monument was the day we were there. That was definitely an experience I will never get again. Hearing the stories of how they built this structure was unbelievable.”*

Further, when reflecting about Joplin, one student wrote, *“One individual said that the tornado hit at 5:22 on 5/22. It makes you wonder if the time was coincidence or if it is planned by a higher power;”* while another student wrote, *“Seeing their [Joplin residents] loss makes me wonder what it would be like if I had to deal with that situation today.”* Additionally, several students made note of the Amish’s education system. One student wrote,

*“I found myself frustrated when learning about their [Amish] education system... I realize that perhaps we are impoverished on the simplicity and innocence that technology, media and our environment takes away from us. I was completely out of my comfort zone.”*

As the Amish men explained their view of education, astonishment was evident in the students’ faces. The students could not believe that most Amish young people were married, would never see a high school classroom or live the college dream and did not have the latest iPhone, which made students question their own lifestyle and how they view the perfect life.

After the experience, students claimed the opportunity was one of the best college experiences.

*“... Our presence at the National FFA Convention was helpful to the facilitators, but our journey up there was the most beneficial trip I have been on. I learned more in that one week than I have in a semester long class ... . College students go through many experiences that mean nothing and many experiences that change not only the way you think about something but also changes you as a person. That is exactly what this experience did to me.”*

### Discussion

Experiential learning opportunities such as this field experience might be seen as unnecessary, inappropriate learning environments. However, participants believed it was one of the most meaningful learning environments of their college careers because they were able to learn in an actively engaging and emotionally challenging environment with a diverse cohort (Kolb, 1984). The applications revealed that students’ desire to participate in the experience was to learn more about agriculture and to develop personal skills, which were different from the

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trip's outcomes identified in the students' reflections. After analyzing reflections from the experience, we discovered that the desire to know is realized through immersion followed by reflection resulting in high impact learning. Although students' expectations of the trip were to be exposed to agriculture, career opportunities, experience, networking and fun, their experience exceeded their expectations. In their reflections, students expressed seven major themes about their experience: emotion, service, culture, barriers/risks, professionalism, career and desire to know.

Although Kolb's (1984) model provided guidance for developing this course, expansion of the model's message to integrate Roberts' (2006) model of the experiential learning process could provide a greater depth of understanding for students. Roberts' model incorporates focus, experience, reflection, generalization and the experience again, all in a continuous process. Focus is where students are introduced to subjects the experience may or will present (Roberts, 2006). In preparation for the trip, lectures should be prepared and taught according to the topics and experiences the cohort could and/or will encounter on their trip. Roberts (2006) noted to be sure to "leave room for unplanned, spontaneous learning as a result of the experience" (p. 21). Better preparing students beforehand may have helped the cohort process everything on the trip more thoroughly.

Many of the students who participated in the field experience had no prior knowledge of agriculture in the Midwest and, therefore, had the potential to develop new ideas and opinions about the different types of agricultural practices in the United States. The intended design of the course was such that new ideas and new perspectives of familiar topics would be presented to the students, which supports Kolb's assertion that "learning is relearning" (1984, p. 28). In theory, students could draw from the theoretical concepts, knowledge and skills from previous courses (e.g., reporting, designing, communication, writing, leadership and education) and apply to each of the experiential learning stages as described by Kolb (1984). Inquiring about events witnessed or experienced helps students gain

a deeper understanding and value of a subject while forming their own opinions, according to Kolb (1984). The hope was that new knowledge would arise from students' major-specific projects (designing a three-page layout and story; reestablishing a collegiate FFA program; and developing an agricultural education unit on a topic of their choice) and the experiential learning cycle would continue.

This field experience provided students with an opportunity to be self-directed learners (Knowles et al., 2005) and test new knowledge gained through the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). By interacting with different cultures and forming relationships with natives, professionals and fellow participants (Joplin, 1981), students had the opportunity to have a greater experience and immerse themselves into a deeper level of understanding and learning. Students learned the importance of communication and co-existing with their peers as they explored and volunteered at the National FFA Convention, which Kolb (1984) noted as an important part of the experiential learning process. As students were exposed to concrete learning environments, they engaged in a deeper thought process (Joplin, 1981; Townsend and Briers, 1990) that often provoked emotions and feelings toward the experience. When students first saw the tornado ravaged community of Joplin, they were in awe. They had never before seen





such destruction and ruins. One student compared the sight to war while others could not understand living without electricity for five months. Students, some more than others, left Joplin with a different outlook on life.

Students viewed the field experience as an eye-opening, applicable, real-world and challenging opportunity to learn. *“Touring the wreckage and visiting with the people who were affected by the tornado was by far the most relative real-world experience [Joplin],”* which supports Kolb’s (1984) notion that real-world experiences develop students’ minds and prepare them for their career field. In the current job market it is difficult for students to capitalize on job opportunities without previous application of theoretical and conceptual paradigms within their profession. This field experience provided students with the opportunity to apply theories and concepts that would lead to future opportunities—publications, internships and full-time positions. The field experience course was designed to incorporate elements that promoted active learning and application at various points throughout the experience. One student reflected, *“I think that it is important for students to have high impact experiences outside of the classroom to supplement material learned in the classroom,”* which was the purpose of the field experience.

Furthermore, students reflected on the experience in their minds and their journals, which Boud et al. (1985a) and Kolb (1984) stated as an important part of experiential learning. Reflecting on feelings, senses and knowledge during the experience (Kolb, 1984) improves students’ communication and critical thinking skills (Mabie and Baker, 1996). Roberts’ (2006) model emphasized the importance of reflection and generalization after the experience. Reflection provides students more opportunities to have deeper, personal journals. This high impact field experience encouraged students to embrace their education and take it to the next level through developing as an individual, inquiring the unknown or misunderstood and immersing themselves into each environment entered. However, future studies should incorporate formal reflection groups to encourage reflection each day. Debriefing daily activities will ensure that students are learning, not simply having a vacation from the classroom (Baker and Robinson, 2011). Additionally, determining students’ learning styles beforehand may contribute to the organization of reflection groups. When accessing the generalization portion of Roberts’ model, reflections guided by prompted questions may expand student learning in various contexts.

The observations in this study occurred during one semester in a particular setting with a specific group; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized beyond

the cohort. The long-term impact of this particular field experience on the cohort is not yet evident and is not likely to be documented. In-depth investigations of these types of experiences should be documented and could result in a greater understanding of one of the many impacts thought to be associated with experiential learning in agricultural education. As educators, it is important to look at opportunities to incorporate both small- and large-scale field experiences into course curriculum. However, it is necessary to use care when incorporating such experiences because each cohort may react differently to the same setting.

The emphasis for study abroad programs is evident at many universities and, in some cases, overshadows the unique experiences that could occur during a study away. Educators must not overlook the opportunities for high-impact learning to occur within the bounds of the United States. Also, it is possible that students, who may feel uncomfortable leaving their normal surroundings for an overseas destination, may be more inclined to participate in study abroad experiences once they have participated in a study away experience.

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