

# An Applied International Equine Experience Benefits Employability Skills in Undergraduate Students<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Applied international experiences benefit students in many ways and possibly contribute to skills deemed important by employers. The objective of this study was to determine specific skillsets gained by undergraduate students during an applied equine international experience from both student and employer perspectives. Eight students were selected to conduct horse management seminars in an international setting. Students completed a reflection where they reported experience with a new culture, becoming more global and marketable, communication skills, credibility and responsibility as useful components of the impending trip. A student reflection suggested communication, problem solving and teamwork as the top skills enhanced as a result of the international experience. Current employers of graduated students who participated in the trip reported that those employees were good team players, possessed excellent public speaking skills, worked well in a diverse group and were good problem solvers. An applied international equine program had student and employer perceived advantages for soft skill development and enhancement. International programs offer varied experiences to students; a more concrete description of the advantages of applied international programming would be useful to assist job seekers with illustrating the benefits of an international experience and support university programs when justifying and promoting international programming.

## Introduction

Preparing graduates with specific skills necessary for success in the workplace is a common goal of all university programs. Most skills necessary for success in the workplace might be specific to each discipline, but many soft skills are valued by most employers, including communication, problem solving, being a team player and leadership skills (Crawford et al., 2011). Certainly equine programs are interested in graduating competent students who not only possess the technical equine knowledge and hands-on experience required for entry

level jobs, but that also possess important soft skills highly sought after by employers.

Equine students are increasingly crossing borders and seeking experience in their chosen field through international networks as evidenced by the large number of international equine experience programs at universities across the globe. Employers are interested in hiring personnel with experience related to cultural issues and managing international relationships (Ledwith and Seymour, 2001; Earley et al., 2006; Crossman and Clarke, 2010). Yet employers are hesitant to rank international experiences very high in importance when evaluating potential employees compared to other important soft skills like communication, problem solving and leadership skills (Crawford et al., 2011). Even though this disparity remains, university programs recognize that striving to make their students global is essential in an effort to make graduates marketable (Acker and Scanes, 2000; Moore et al., 2009; Rowan-Kenyon and Niehaus, 2011).

For university equine programs, the key to a successful international program is being able to quantify the benefit a student receives as a result of the experience and specifically how the experience will benefit the student once they are in the workplace. Identifying the benefit of an international experience or program will help to justify the tremendous funds required to conduct such programs, assist administrators when assessing curriculum and can assist employers with understanding the benefits derived from an international experience when evaluating potential employees. Therefore, the objective of this study was to determine specific skillsets gained or enhanced by undergraduate students during an applied international experience.

## Methods

This study was deemed exempt by the NMSU Institutional Review Board (IRB). Eight female students from New Mexico State University were selected based on their horse knowledge and public speaking ability

<sup>1</sup>Travel and accommodations for clinicians were provided by the American Quarter Horse Association, Aggies Go Global and Cuarto de Milla Paraguay.

**Table 1. Horse management topics covered by NMSU clinicians in Paraguay as a part of an interactive international experience. Seminar topics were decided with assistance from Paraguayan horsemen to meet their needs. Students prepared seminars and clinics in small groups with the assistance of the faculty advisor for the international trip then delivered them in country at Expo Paraguay.**

Form to Function	Horse Behavior
First Aid	Aging Horses by Teeth
Functionality of Bits	Genetics
Ranch Horse Management	Nutrition
Exercise Physiology	Coat Color
Halter Breaking	Groundwork

through interviews to conduct horse management seminars and clinics. All students were majoring or minoring in animal science with an emphasis in equine science at New Mexico State University.

**Preparation Before the International Experience**

Through an industry grant, a basic horse science curriculum was created that covered twelve pertinent topics for the horse industry and horse production in Paraguay to be delivered during an international agricultural exposition at Expo Paraguay. Seminars and clinics on basic horse management and training the young horse were prepared in advance of the trip. Topics were synthesized with the help of the university students responsible for delivering information and the Paraguayan horsemen they would teach to be relatable to that specific industry. Students were required to use their knowledge of the equine industry in the United States coupled with research they conducted regarding the equine industry in South America to complete their seminars with help from equine faculty. Students worked in teams of 2-3 to prepare seminars and clinics and deliver them once in country. Topics that were covered are presented in Table 1.

To include a reflection as suggested by Jones and Bjelland (2004), students were asked to brainstorm and create a list of positive skillsets that could be gained from their international experience during preparation time.

**During the International Experience**

Students conducted clinics and seminars about basic horse management and training for fifty Paraguayan horsemen over a 7-day period. Students were assisted by multiple interpreters and delivered information in a classroom setting, hands-on with horses in the arena and on-site of several local equine facilities. Students interacted with Paraguayan horsemen throughout the trip and were immersed in the culture, attending several local events. Students began the day with a coaching session from the faculty leader for the trip, conducted seminars or clinics throughout the morning, toured facilities and taught on-site in the early afternoon, then spent the rest of the

day immersed in the culture, while practicing for the following day’s clinic at the culmination of each day. All students contributed to a journal for reflection and a blog to keep family and friends at home apprised of the trip. In addition to group seminars, students had the opportunity to work with horsemen in a one-on-one fashion to understand the needs of each individual producer and help design producer specific strategies for improvement in horse management.

**After the International Experience**

Four months after students returned from the international trip, they were asked to elaborate on their positive and negative experiences and specific skills gained or enhanced that have been useful since the trip as a form of reflection. The analysis was conducted four months after the international trip because researchers wanted to know if the students were using skills learned or enhanced from the trip in everyday life. Four months was chosen to be short enough of a time period that students would still remember the international trip and long enough that any habits or behaviors currently exhib-

**Figure 1. Questionnaire given to students four months after returning from an international experience in Paraguay. Questionnaire was distributed via email and returned in the same manner.**

1. What are you doing now? Still a student? Working? If working, please describe what you do and where you work.
2. What is your best memory from the international trip to Paraguay?
3. What is your least favorite memory from the international trip to Paraguay?
4. What do you wish you had known before you left for Paraguay? What would have been most helpful for to get prepared for an international trip? (more than 1 response is okay)
5. How will this trip impact your future?
6. What skills did you gain from the experience that are helpful to you now, or might be helpful in your future career? Please elaborate on the experience you had and its impact on the specific skills listed and feel free to add in additional skills not on this list.
  - a. Communication Skills
  - b. Leadership Skills
  - c. Problem Solving Skills
  - d. Teamwork Skills
  - e. Other Skills
7. Please indicate how the international trip to Paraguay ranks among the following factors on a scale of 1 to 5 where 5 is the highest.
 

	5	4	3	2	1	
	○	○	○	○	○	Useful
Good experience	○	○	○	○	○	Bad experience
Important for my future	○	○	○	○	○	Not important for my future
Time well spent	○	○	○	○	○	Time wasted
Developed important skills	○	○	○	○	○	No skill development

**Figure 2. List of phone interview questions asked of employers of students who participated in an international experience in Paraguay. The interview was conducted in a semi-structured interview style by the same person for each employer.**

1. What is (name of student)’s job title? How long has (name of student) held that position/worked for your company?
2. What are (name of student)’s primary responsibilities as your employee?
3. Where you aware that (name of student) participated in an international trip to Paraguay in July of this year?
4. Do you consider an international experience in college an important experience for potential employees of your company?
4. Can you please comment on (name of student)’s abilities as observed at work regarding the following skills:
  - a. Communication Skills?
  - b. Leadership Skills?
  - c. Problem Solving Skills?
  - d. Teamwork Skills?
  - e. Other Skills that you deem important to complete the job (name of student) has at your company?
5. Is there anything else I should know about (name of student)’s employment?

ited and attributed to the international trip are rooted in everyday behavior. The reflection period (Kolb, 1948; Roberts, 2006) was conducted via personal email correspondence with the faculty leader from the international experience. Students were asked to fill out a questionnaire and elaborate on their experiences (Figure 1). Current employers of graduated students (n=6) were contacted by phone six months after the trip for an interview by the faculty lead to determine usefulness of the skills gained from the international experience to the student's progress as employees. Interviews were conversational in nature, but specific questions were asked to elucidate employer perception of those specific employees. A list of questions asked of the employers is reported in Figure 2.

### Results and Discussion

Data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel and is discussed using descriptive statistics.

#### Before the International Experience

Prior to taking the international trip, students completed a brainstorming session and all contributed to a word cloud written on the blackboard. The student created word cloud (Figure 3) revealed several factors as useful to their future employment, including: becoming more global and marketable, experience with a new culture, communication skills, credibility and responsibility. Students surmised that experience with a new culture equated to their becoming more well-rounded and global. Students thought communication skills would be enhanced through disseminating important information both one-on-one and in a large group setting to Paraguayan horsemen who were eager to learn. Certainly students were proud to have been selected for the trip and felt this enhanced their credibility to future employers and they recognized the importance of the material to Paraguayan horsemen and felt a great deal of responsibility to deliver useful information. The students' sense of responsibility was integral in ensuring they were com-

mitted to performing well according to the faculty lead from the experience.

#### After the International Experience: Student Perception

Four months after returning from Paraguay, students completed a questionnaire (Figure 1) where they detailed the impact of the international trip in several categories with results reported in Table 2 and Table 3. In the Likert response portion of their survey, all students indicated the international trip was useful, a good experience, important for their future, time well spent and helped to develop important skills (Table 2). Students then elaborated on their experiences and skill development. Students (n=8) reported they had opportunities to enhance team-work and communication skills by preparing and coordinating with other students and interacting with a diverse group of people once in country. Students learned multiple ways to communicate with people who spoke alternate languages and several students (n=6) reported learning another language to some degree and sharpening language skills while on the international trip. All students reported the experience helped them to work intimately with someone they did not know and accredited those skills to having to interact with multiple interpreters while on the trip. Students (n=7) recognized the immense patience it took to communicate with horsemen from another country, especially those who didn't speak the same language or possess the same basic knowledge or experience related to the topic. One student reported they had many opportunities to "adapt my teaching style to the group I was teaching to and was forced to step out of my comfort zone." All students reported their improvising skills were tested and ultimately increased, as one student stated: "...when one method of communication wasn't working, I could only try another." Clearly communication skills were tested and enhanced during this interactive immersion experience, which is important since they are regarded as the most important skill set of a potential employee to most employers (Crawford et al., 2011).

Students (n=8) recognized the problem solving skills required to conduct this type of international program as many students indicated that the research they did prior to the trip was helpful, but could not prepare them for some of the hardships Paraguayan horsemen face. Students were required to think critically to address and solve real world problems facing our hosts and indicated that their problem solving skills were heightened. One student reported: "gauging the audience to determine what information would help them best was a difficult task at the beginning of our clinics, but became second nature by the end" another student said "When we were at a site visit, a horseman showed me some fresh cut grass they were feeding and had some questions about best practices for feeding several different horses. I had never seen that type of grass or method of cutting, so several of us worked together in a group to make helpful recommendations that utilized our diverse previous

Figure 3. Student created word cloud detailing perceived benefits from an international experience in Paraguay created prior to traveling abroad.





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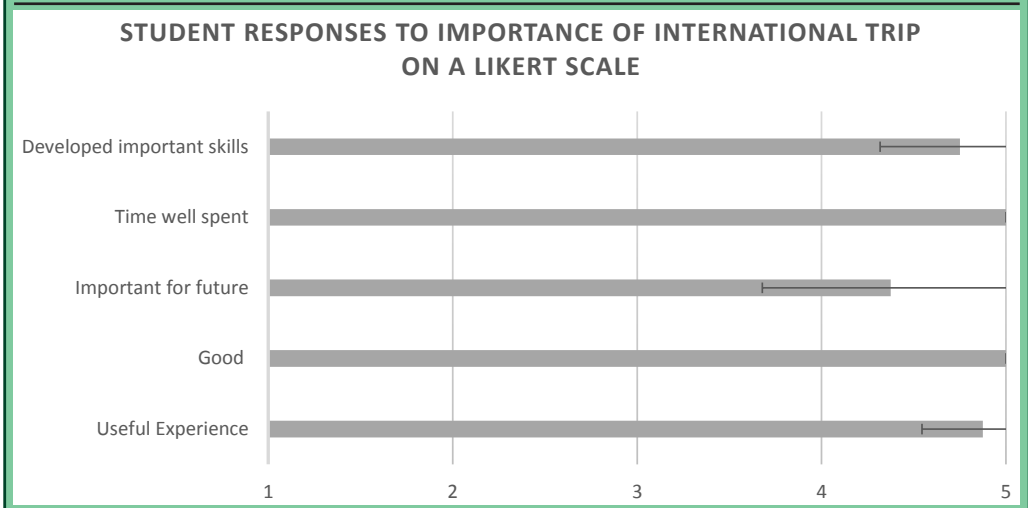
experiences.” Development of problem solving skills is paramount since they are deemed the second most important soft skill by potential employers, right behind communication skills (Crawford et al., 2011). Students (n=8) also recognized the substantial teamwork and leadership skills that were developed as a result of the preparation process and time spent conducting clinics in country. The immersion in the project and high expectations for the students’ work contributed to each student feeling an obligation to provide accurate and useful

information to people they began to care about according to most students (n=7), which agrees with development of soft skills for undergraduates (Boyce et al., 2001).

All students indicated that they enjoyed working as team to deliver important information to people that had a relationship with and felt a duty to. One student said: *“working with other horsemen who have different experiences than me was challenging and rewording, I learned as much as I taught”* and another stated: *“I was a little intimidated to be teaching alongside other students and I was shy at first. I quickly learned to speak up and contribute, or get left behind. I am so fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with this group of people.”* Another student elaborated: *“working as part of team has new meaning to me after our trip to Paraguay, I experienced first-hand how beneficial we were when we contributed to each other’s ideas and helped each other succeed in an effort to help the Paraguayan horsemen. It was so nice to not be concerned about the grade we would receive from our work, but to be concerned about helping people we cared about. Since we had the opportunity to get to know our hosts so well, we really wanted to do something nice for them and helping them with their horses was the best way for us to help them.”*

All students reported that this system of coaching, high expectations of performance and down-time that allowed them to spend quality time getting to know their hosts was extremely useful and contributed to their success and skill enhancement. All students were grateful to have been selected to travel to and teach in Paraguay and they thought the experience would be helpful to obtain a job in the future and were glad to add the experience to their resume. Most students (n=5) thought the international trip would convey important skills they possessed to their potential employers simply because they participated in the experience and had it listed on their resume. One student clarified: *“I very*

**Table 2. Student responses (n=8) from the Likert scale survey questions regarding their perception of an international experience in Paraguay taken four months after returning. Students were asked to rank the experience in each category from 1 to 5 with 5 being the highest possible response for each category.**



**Table 3. Student (n=8) perception of their soft skill development four months after returning from an international trip to Paraguay. Results are reported as frequency of individual student responses for each skill.**

Skill	Developed or Enhanced	Not Developed	Not Applicable or Not Reported
Communication	8 (100 %)	0	0
Leadership	8 (100 %)	0	0
Problem Solving	8 (100 %)	0	0
Teamwork	8 (100 %)	0	0
Learning a Language	6 (75 %)	0	2 (25 %)
Improvising	8 (100 %)	0	0
Understanding of and compassion for Paraguayan horsemen	7 (87.5 %)	0	1 (12.5 %)

*much enjoyed being part of a diverse group of students and think it will be an asset to me in the future because it shows I can be a team player, responsible for my duties and can communicate well”* while another thought *“When you live and work in a foreign country, you are forced to think out of the box and step out of your comfort zone. I think employers will appreciate this experience and it will help my resume to stand out from my peers.”*

### After the International Experience: Employer Perception

Six months after the international experience, employers (n=6) were contacted via telephone and a short interview (Figure 2) was conducted to determine overall perception of their new employees’ soft-skills with all results reported in Table 4. Six employers were contacted because only six of the eight students who participated in the international trip had since graduated and gained employment. Five out of the six employers were aware that their employee participated in an international trip the previous summer. Employers reported that their employees who had experienced the international trip were good communicators and team players (n=6), worked well in a diverse group (n=4) and were good problem solvers (n=5). Some employers (n=5) also reported excellent public speaking skills in their employees who had been on the trip. This agrees with previous research that indicated international experiences had a high impact on students’ career skill

**Table 4. Employer (n=6) perception of the soft skill ability of their employees who participated as students in the international experience in Paraguay. Employers were surveyed six months after students returned from Paraguay. Six employers were surveyed because only 6 of the students had graduated and were employed six months after the international trip. Results are reported as frequency of individual responses of employers responding for each skill.**

	Excellent or Good	Acceptable	Not Acceptable	Not Applicable*
Communication Skills	6 (100 %)	0	0	0
Leadership Skills	1 (17 %)	0	0	5 (83 %)
Problem Solving	5 (83 %)	1 (17 %)	0	0
Team Player	6 (100 %)	0	0	0
Public Speaking Ability	5 (83 %)	1 (17 %)	0	0
Diversity	4 (67 %)	2 (33 %)	0	0

\*Most employers (n=5) indicated they had not yet had the opportunity to observe their employees leadership ability.

but for their own pride in a job well done delivering information to people they cared about in a field in which they were very dedicated. Additionally, the model utilized to engage students before, during and after the global experience was successful and followed suggested framework (Roberts et al., 2013).

development (Thompson et al., 2000). Regardless, several employers (n=5) surveyed here reported that an international experience is not high on their list of priorities when interviewing potential employees. One of those five employers did indicate that while an international experience is not one of the top experiences they are looking for in employees, they think that it is “an advantageous experience for a student to have while in college”. This agrees with previous research where international experiences were low on a priority list for hiring employees (Crawford et al., 2011). One employer in that study clarified: *“One ‘experience’ I am seeing on more and more resumes of new grads is trips abroad or student exchanges... I do not hire for international positions nor does my company send employees abroad but I know these experiences can make for a better prepared candidate. I would like to see more students who are able to tell what that experience taught them and how it would make them a better fit for my company and the role they are pursuing”* (Crawford et al., 2011). The international experience itself may not be as important to employers as the many soft skills gained from the experience. While an international experience might not be the most sought after experience for most employers, it has the potential to contribute to all the highest ranking skillsets employers are looking for in potential employees. This revelation makes it more important than ever to qualify the types of skills gained from each international experience and help students package and convey those skills in a useful way when applying for jobs. It is worthwhile to note that none of the employers surveyed here indicated their employees were unacceptable regarding the aforementioned skillsets.

**Summary**

Students were completely committed to the success of the international trip, specifically because they were integral in preparing materials for conducting the clinics and because the content of the seminars and clinics is directly related to their future career path. Students acted as consultants, using knowledge gained through university curriculum to solve legitimate problems for the Paraguayan horse producers. Students felt a great deal of responsibility to help Paraguayan horseman and worked extremely hard to solve their management problems. Students were deeply invested in performing well not because they were to receive a grade for the trip,

It is widely accepted that international experiences contribute many skillsets that employers deem important, yet the experience as a whole is not considered paramount, specifically ranked the lowest soft skill for desired experience by employers (Crawford et al., 2011). However, the international experience in this study contributed to many of the highest ranking soft skills (communication, problem solving, teamwork). Certainly there are several factors contributing to this confusion, including the varied experiences students have on the many international trips offered through university programs. A more concrete description of the advantages of applied international programming would be useful to assist job seekers with illustrating the benefits of an international experience to potential employers. Additionally, packaging the entire experience as specific soft skills gained or enhanced in an attractive way for potential employers would be beneficial for a student’s resume. This international experience should be highly regarded by potential employers because it developed or enhanced important employability skills (related horse knowledge and experience, teamwork, problem solving and communication skills) in students that researchers have determined are the highest ranked skills of potential employees (Crawford et al., 2011).

Finally, university administrators and international program coordinators need more concrete evidence for the benefit derived from international experiences. Scientifically supported evidence could help to justify the extensive funds required to run successful programs. This information could also help parents and students when considering the risks vs. rewards of including international programming in their collegiate experience.

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