
Teaching Agribusiness Management in Lithuania: Developing An International Perspective for Undergraduate Teachers

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Abstract

Faculty in agricultural colleges and universities are increasingly asked to consider short-term international teaching assignments. Benefits of such experiences can accrue to both the host country and the faculty member's institution. However, careful planning and considerable effort is required for such experiences to achieve the desired benefits. This article outlines the steps taken in development, presentation, and follow-up of a successful continuing education program conducted in Lithuania. The general objective of this program was to introduce principles of agribusiness marketing and finance to Lithuanian agribusiness managers and university faculty. Keys to the program's success included careful initial planning of all program details, development of teaching materials oriented toward the host country's situation, inclusion of host country faculty in all phases of the program, and a plan developed before the program was conducted for how this international experience would be brought into the domestic classroom.

Introduction

Teachers of agriculture at the college level have increasingly been asked to help students broaden their perspective beyond U.S. borders. Such efforts at 'internationalizing' an agricultural course can involve anything from bringing in a few examples from other countries, to a complete restructuring of the course from a truly global perspective (Shaw and Akridge). In many cases, the faculty being asked to help cultivate this international perspective have little or no international experience. This situation presents a difficult challenge for both faculty and administrators. At the same time, there appears to be increasing demand for the expertise of U.S. ag-

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ricultural faculty by other countries — especially the countries that comprised the former Soviet Union. This combination of events has presented exciting opportunities for U.S. faculty to bolster their international understanding, developing both a perspective and teaching materials that can be used in the domestic classroom. At the same time, these U.S. faculty can share ideas with managers, scientists, and students in the host country, helping these countries achieve their development goals.

The challenge for all involved is tapping the full potential of such an international experience — conducting a program that meets the needs of the host country as well as fulfilling the need to better prepare a faculty member for the task of bringing a more international perspective to the classroom. In this article, lessons learned from a successful continuing education program conducted in Lithuania by three undergraduate teachers will be reviewed. First, the general situation in Lithuania and the rationale for the program will be presented. Then, the steps employed in developing and conducting the program will be discussed. Finally, some keys to maximizing the potential of these collaborative efforts will be given.

Situation and Program Objectives

Lithuania, one of the Baltic republics, is a small (population 3.5 million) country located north of Poland on the Baltic Sea (Lithuanian Department of Statistics). Since Lithuania declared its independence from the former Soviet Union in 1988, dramatic changes have taken place as the country has attempted to move to a more market-oriented economy. For example, privatization of most state lands has significantly altered the average size of farm — from several thousand hectares under the Communist regime to 9.3 hectares today (Lithuanian Department of Statistics). This change alone calls for dramatic refocusing of efforts of many agribusinesses in terms of their marketing strategy. Other changes present similar, enormous challenges for Lithuanian agribusiness managers.

After decades of Communist rule, many Lithuanian agribusiness managers, entrepreneurs, and university faculty lack a fundamental understanding of firm management in a free market economy. To respond to this need, the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) funded a joint project of the Lithuanian Academy of Agriculture (LAA) and the Purdue University Cen-

ter for Agricultural Business (CAB) to provide a series of seminars for managers of Lithuanian agribusiness firms, teachers of management, economics, and accounting in Lithuanian high schools and colleges, and government agency personnel. The primary objective of the seminars was to present and discuss the basic concepts of agribusiness marketing and finance. More importantly, the focus of this project was to develop participants' analytical problem solving skills and to illustrate how the basic concepts of marketing and finance may be applied in Lithuanian agribusiness firms.

In addition to this primary objective, a second objective of the project was to develop educational materials, handouts, problem sets, overhead transparencies, and case studies to facilitate instruction of these ideas in the Lithuanian classroom. Use of these materials in the seminar was to be structured to showcase various teaching techniques (lecture, discussion, team teaching, case studies, problem sets, etc.) to the participants, particularly the faculty and teachers. The final objective was to help broaden the perspective of the Purdue faculty involved, and develop materials and examples that could be used in the U.S. graduate and undergraduate agricultural business classroom.

Development of Materials

Materials development began with a trip to Kaunas, Lithuania by one of the three U.S. faculty members involved in the project. During this initial visit, faculty from the Lithuanian Academy of Agriculture helped identify firms which would serve as the subject of the case studies. Preliminary interviews were conducted with two of these firms. These case studies, in-depth descriptions of actual marketing and financial management problems faced by Lithuanian agribusiness firms, were to play an important instructional role in the program.

On-site organizational responsibilities for the seminar were divided among the Lithuanian faculty team on this visit. A tentative list of topics for inclusion in the seminar was developed. After this initial visit, the Lithuanian faculty team conducted additional firm interviews to collect data for the case studies, developed a plan for promoting the seminar after defining target groups of participants, and identified options for materials duplication, housing, meals, seminar rooms, etc.

The remaining two U.S. faculty members made a subsequent trip to Kaunas to visit and interview additional Lithuanian agribusiness firms, complete development of the case studies, finalize course content, complete development of course materials, and finalize planning of all seminar organizational details. Managers and employees of four firms that would be the focus of the four case studies were interviewed during this trip. During the visit to each firm, a number of photographs were taken of the operation and the firm's management and employees. These photographs were to become a slide show on each firm that could be used with the case study in the U.S. classroom.

Development of all materials was completed on this second visit and a schedule for the program was outlined, along

with teaching assignments. In addition to the three day seminar on agribusiness marketing and finance, a two day teaching workshop for high school teachers and LAA faculty was planned. Discussions with LAA faculty convinced seminar leaders that this extra effort could add significantly to the institution building objective of the project.

Four cases were written on Lithuanian businesses — a small entrepreneurial start-up dairy processing plant, a large state-owned dairy processing firm, a large state-owned/private-owned pork production and processing operation, and a large state-owned agricultural machinery production and service business. Purdue faculty prepared the first draft of the case studies and a Lithuanian faculty member was responsible for edits and translation of the final version. Each case was co-authored with a different Lithuanian faculty member in an attempt to include Lithuanian faculty in all project phases. These case studies represented an extremely valuable resource in teaching management concepts to Lithuanian participants. In addition, these cases were developed with the intention of using them in the U.S. classroom longer term.

All seminar materials were translated into Lithuanian and typed for use in the seminar. The materials were of excellent quality, with English on the left side of the page and Lithuanian on the right side of the page. The materials were printed and bound in Kaunas for use in the seminar. A copy of all lecture notes was shipped back to the U.S. prior to the seminar so overhead transparencies could be prepared for the program. These transparencies were made in the same format as the booklet of handout materials (English on left side, Lithuanian on right side) to allow participants to more easily follow lecture material. All materials were to be left in Lithuania for use in future classes and seminars at the conclusion of this project. In addition, Purdue personnel prepared name badges, tent cards for desks, certificates for seminar participants, and notebooks for materials which were then taken to Lithuania. These small touches seemed much appreciated by the program participants and added significantly to the program's overall impact.

The Seminars

A total of 53 managers and specialists, 37 university faculty, 7 high school teachers, and 22 senior university students attended the 3 three-day seminars. These seminars had a market planning and financial analysis focus. Topics related to evaluation of firm performance and evaluating firm marketing decisions were addressed. Three of the four case studies were used in the program and these three cases played an important role in illustrating practical application of the concepts discussed in the lectures. Seminar participants were very favorable in their comments about the effort taken to illustrate marketing and finance problems with Lithuanian firms. At the same time, it was important to use U.S. examples throughout the program since many key points could be best developed using U.S. situations. However, these U.S. examples

seemed much more palatable to the participants given that Lithuanian examples were also used.

Eight major topics were covered — market planning: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis; marketing goals: the core marketing strategy; the marketing mix; the balance sheet and income statement; financial ratios; and breakeven analysis. The three U.S. faculty served as primary instructors for the program and all three faculty attended every session. This number of faculty helped the seminar flow smoothly and facilitated interaction with individual groups during breakout sessions and case study discussions. When one individual was leading the discussion the other two could observe participants and make additional comments on the material being covered. And, at other times, having multiple faculty allowed some topics to be team taught with two faculty sharing lecture/discussion leadership.

The four members of the Lithuanian faculty team were involved at several points during the seminar — the opening session, daily reviews, case debriefings, and the closing session. They also played an important role in consulting and advising participants in the small group exercises and case study preparation. At the time of the seminar, this group of faculty were not comfortable enough with all of the material to lead a full content session. The activities listed above gave the Lithuanian faculty a chance to be involved with the program without putting them in an awkward position because of their lack of background.

The interpreter for the program was superb and made an important contribution to the success of the program. Because facilities were not available, simultaneous translation was not used. Rather, the Purdue faculty would make short statements and stop. The interpreter would make the statement in Lithuanian, and the process would then be repeated. The same process was used in reverse when participants were offering comments. While sounding unwieldy, the process worked extremely well. Many Lithuanians are learning English, and this process gave them a good chance to practice their understanding of business English. And, the willingness of the interpreter to adapt to the presentation style of the speakers helped preserve the energy and dynamics of the presentations. Effective management of the interpretation process is a key to program success.

A number of techniques were used to create discussion during the week and by the end of the first day, interaction among the participants and with the instructors was excellent. It was important to set the stage for such discussion early because many Lithuanians are accustomed to a very strict lecture style of teaching where instructors talk and students listen, with little or no interaction. To start this process, a special opening exercise was used where each person had to introduce the person seated next to them to the full group. The first lecture started with a discussion exercise to build on this opening. Then, one full session was built around how planning is done in Lithuanian businesses. Various managers in attendance at each seminar agreed to discuss their planning efforts with the full group. This proved to be an excellent vehicle to encourage the discussion process.

Small group exercises were used extensively during the seminar. At each seminar, the full group was broken into several, smaller groups. These small groups then worked on the case studies among themselves and reported back in a debriefing session to the full class group. Again, this was a technique many were unfamiliar with. However, when groups were given a specific task to perform, they were enthusiastic in their efforts. The groups especially appreciated Purdue faculty dropping in unannounced to check on their progress and answer their questions. A number of other techniques were used to keep the discussion lively including asking the participants questions, daily oral reviews of the previous day's material, and in-class exercises. The group was also especially appreciative of the use of humor throughout the program. Much of it was self-deprecating humor between the three Purdue faculty, and it served to lessen the distance between the faculty and the participants.

All participants completed a written evaluation of the seminar at the end of the program. In addition, each small group gave an oral evaluation of the program to the full group. Evaluations for the program were excellent, ranging from 4.50 to 5.0 (scale of 5.0 excellent, 1.0 poor) for the topical lectures and between 4.12 and 4.80 for the case studies. No significant differences in evaluations were found across the four groups in attendance. Instructor evaluations averaged 4.98 on the same 5.0 scale.

The Teaching Workshop

The Pre- and Post-Session Workshop on Teaching Agribusiness was attended by 20 university faculty and high school teachers on the afternoon prior to the start of the first three day seminar and the morning immediately following the conclusion of the first seminar. The primary focus of this workshop was on teaching methods and curricula development. Topics covered included teaching agribusiness to undergraduate students, teaching agribusiness to adults, the development and use of case studies, course and program evaluations, agribusiness curricula, and the use of small group teaching techniques. An important component of this session was a panel discussion of issues critical to teaching in Lithuania. Two and 1/2 hours of the first workshop session were devoted to this discussion — first in small groups, then as a full group. This dialogue may have been the highlight of the teaching workshop.

It was clear from the outset of this special session that the teachers in Lithuania had an intense interest in learning new techniques and new methods of teaching. They seemed to experience many of the same problems that U.S. faculty members do in the classroom — piquing student interest, keeping students motivated, securing class attendance, and working with employers to place students upon graduation. Many teachers were quite frank in this seminar about their reluctance to experiment with new teaching techniques. They looked forward to the seminar the following day to experience some U.S. teaching methods and to cover the conceptual material on agribusiness marketing and finance.

At the end of the week, the second teaching workshop session provided an opportunity to debrief the seminar. Here, the focus was not on content, but on teaching techniques. Each teaching technique used in the seminar was discussed and the rationale for using the technique was presented. At this point, the teachers seemed a bit more comfortable about the possibility of trying new presentation styles and instructional methods in their classroom after having experienced these techniques first-hand as a participant in the program. Most appeared willing to utilize one or more of the seminar case studies in their classroom.

Additional Follow-up in Lithuania

The four members of the LAA faculty team intend to utilize the case studies and educational materials developed for the seminars in their classrooms. As these faculty gained experience through the process, they became more interested and enthusiastic about the potential this material offered their undergraduate students. LAA faculty intend to test this material in their classrooms and follow-up with Purdue faculty on the development of additional classroom materials and case studies. There continues to be a high demand and interest in conducting further seminars of this nature in Lithuanian and the surrounding Baltic states.

Use in U.S. Teaching Programs

Obviously benefits from such a project run both directions. Perhaps the most tangible evidence of benefits to Purdue University is the use of the seminar materials in on-campus agribusiness management courses. For example, the case study on the Lithuanian pork firm, Agrofirma Sidabra (Akridge, et. al.), was used in both graduate and undergraduate courses in strategic agribusiness management. Many of the students in the courses had a real interest in international issues, and the case proved to be an ideal vehicle to expose the class to a number of important ideas.

First, and perhaps most importantly, the case presented the challenges an agribusiness manager faces in managing a firm during an economy's transition to a free market orientation. Second, the case allowed students to explore issues related to integration which transcend country boundaries — the issues the integrated operation Agrofirma Sidabra faces in managing the entire pork production and distribution process from farrowing through the retail butcher shop would be faced by any firm in any country pursuing such a strategy. And, the fact that the course instructors had visited the Lithuanian operation, talked with the general director, toured the facility, visited a meat shop, etc. helped bring the case to life. Here, the slides of the actual operation really made the case study more realistic for the students. (As an aside, use of the case in the graduate course was particularly timely as two of the students in the class accepted a small business consulting assignment in Hungary with the American Cooperative Development Institute in the summer following the class.)

Another of the four cases was used in a junior-senior level financial management class at Purdue. This case, Agrotechnica (Erickson, et. al.), addressed the challenges of a Lithuanian agricultural machinery company trying to develop a market for a new tractor. The students were asked to conduct a financial analysis of the Lithuanian business and evaluate some proposed marketing changes via breakeven analysis. An added benefit of this case was an ensuing discussion about how inflation should be handled when evaluating financial ratios and developing budgets. Again, the case study was very well received by the undergraduate students.

Some Keys to Success

What lessons can be drawn from this experience to help others planning similar programs? While a number of important lessons can be drawn from the earlier discussion, a few key points will be summarized here.

- 1. Careful initial planning of all program details is required.** This involves details ranging from the target group of participants, to program content, to facilities and audio-visual equipment, to the daily schedule. Of special importance is a good understanding of the target audience. It is easy to bring material that is either too complex or too basic if some time is not invested in understanding the participants. There is little room for assumptions in planning this kind of effort — what is custom in the U.S. may be totally at odds with custom in the host country. For instance, the Lithuanian seminars had to allow long lunch breaks to allow participants enough time to go home for lunch — a trip that usually required a ride on public transportation. While making last minute copies of a new exercise may be easy in a U.S. classroom, the need for translation, the lack of copying equipment or paper, and so on, may make such a request impossible in the host country. The more time invested initially in the planning stages, the better the overall effort.
- 2. Teaching materials oriented to the host country's situation make for a much stronger program.** Investing time in developing case studies, examples, and identifying concepts which are especially important to the target group is worthwhile from a number of perspectives. First, U.S. faculty are much better prepared to conduct a useful session if they have done their homework, and developing such teaching materials is an ideal way to do this preparation. Second, participants are especially appreciative that someone took the time to better understand their situation and not simply tell them how things are done in another country. Third, it makes the transition from concept to practice far easier when the application is to an entity the participants are already familiar with as opposed to trying to see how the idea works in another, unfamiliar situation. Finally, the process of developing teaching materials can be invaluable for involving faculty at the host institution

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in the program, giving them additional confidence to do this on their own.

3. Host country faculty must be involved throughout the process if the program's impact is to go beyond the initial program. This means getting the ideas of the host country faculty team into all of the initial planning, asking them to help with field interviews, having them help develop case studies and other materials, and then getting them involved in instruction. For many, such field work and development may be a new experience — one they are a bit reluctant to pursue. Others will resist becoming involved in instruction. And, in some cases, it may be easier not to involve the host country faculty and simply do the task on your own. However, this approach is short-sighted. Host country faculty, while perhaps resisting initially, will likely feel quite proud of their involvement when the program concludes. And, having been through this experience once, they are far more likely to continue the practice on their own after the U.S. faculty have returned to their home institution.

4. Thinking through how the experience will be used in the U.S. institution is essential. Likely, the U.S. faculty will make only one or two trips to the host country on any given program. Hence, without careful planning, one may start preparing to use materials developed in the host country in the U.S. classroom, only to find that a little more effort while in the host country might have eliminated an important barrier to effective use in the U.S. For example, the case studies developed in this program were virtually ready for use in the U.S. classroom as they were used in Lithuania. However, to help U.S. students better understand these businesses, the decision was made initially to take a number of pictures of the case firms and their employees. While not needed in Lithuania, the slides have been very helpful in using these materials in the U.S. undergraduate classroom.

Summary

This project required a significant expenditure of U.S. faculty resources — three faculty members working, over the

course of one year, about four weeks in Lithuania and roughly three weeks in the U.S. preparing lectures, materials, etc. And, a major investment was made by the Lithuanian Agricultural Academy faculty members to make sure the program was a success in their country. Was it worthwhile from all perspectives?

For this program, the answer is yes. Attendance at each of the three seminars was far beyond initial program expectations. The interaction between the faculty, teachers, senior students, and agribusiness managers in attendance was vigorous and led to very favorable evaluations of each of the sessions. Making sure that teachers and faculty attended each seminar facilitated the institution building objective of the project. If only a few of the teachers and faculty present become more comfortable with this material and the new teaching techniques, the resources expended on the project will be worth the effort.

Finally, the materials developed have found their way into the U.S. classroom, helping U.S. students better understand management in other business environments. Perhaps more importantly, the experience has helped three U.S. faculty more fully embrace the idea of 'internationalization', putting each in a better position to help their students understand the world beyond U.S. borders.

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