Student-Centered Learning Abroad That Enhances Internationalization of Teaching Programs

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Challenge #1: How do we integrate international perspectives into our academic programs?
A challenge with any international experience by students or faculty is the individual, personal nature of the experience. While these experiences have an indelible impact on the individual, they usually are not fully shared with colleagues or other students upon the traveler’s return.

The Approach
- We developed a student-centered international experience program based on undergraduate students participating in research at animal science institutions in Europe.
- The program is based on a USDA-funded project aimed at enhancing international perspectives in animal sciences programs.
- International partners are the Department of Animal Sciences, Wageningen University, The Netherlands, and Foulum Research Centre near Viborg, Denmark. Both are internationally recognized as leaders in animal sciences research.
- Student visits are 8 weeks in the summer. Students work directly with the partner scientists on research projects, as well as investigating broader issues of science and society in their host country.
- To date, 6 students have visited these institutions (4 to Denmark; 2 to Holland). Students for summer 2007 have been selected via a competitive application process and are slated to leave in mid-May.

What Have We Learned?
- Structured learning abroad experiences based on research interactions with international partners can be successful in providing students with highly rewarding experiences.
- To maximize the international experience requires:
  - Establishing effective relationships with international partners. This is challenging because our program may not be top priority to the international partners. They often have different expectations of students based on their own educational system.
  - Pre-travel planning by the program’s faculty is critical for making arrangements for student travel, accommodations, links to international partners, and clarifying expectations of students.
  - Pre-travel preparation by the students is necessary to help them understand the strategies they may need to have a successful learning experience once abroad.
  - At least partial funding to help pay for student travel is essential to recruit students. Many students cannot pay their own way.
  - Sending students abroad does not directly help us internationalize our programs. Students’ experiences, while powerful to the student, are difficult to capture for the benefit of our broader programs.
- Nevertheless, we can expect ~20% of students in our courses already to have an international learning experience. How can we capitalize on that resource?

Challenge #2: How can we capitalize on the experiences of our learning abroad students to provide international/global perspectives to our teaching programs?
It is not reasonable to expect undergraduate students to have a significant impact on our research programs. However, they could impact the teaching programs, both through their role as students and as potential student-teachers.

The Approach
- We developed a semester-long course called ANSC 199WH, Animal Sciences Study Abroad Colloquium. This is a one credit hour course, meeting once per week for 2 hours. The course is designed for Animal Science students with previous study or learning abroad experience.
- Students are expected to develop a learning module that relates to some aspect of animal sciences. The student-generated module is based on the student’s experiences and artifacts from their travel, and allows the student to become a student-teacher.
- The course includes discussion and exercises on teaching/learning concepts, and technical applications for developing the modules.
- Students have direct access to faculty who teach undergraduate courses that may be used for integration of the international modules.

What Have We Learned?
- This post-travel course can help students get greater learning value from their international experience.
- The focus provided by having regular class meetings provides the framework to develop creative and useful means of sharing students’ international experiences and knowledge with others through their learning modules.
- Students sharing their experiences with other learning abroad students substantially enhances the understanding of and insights into their own international experiences.
- These insights provide the back-drop for creation of the international learning modules.
- Getting students to actively and effectively follow through with contributing their learning modules to existing courses in subsequent semesters is challenging. This is a challenge that we are still working on.

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