

Utilizing Professional Development To Ensure International Assignment Impact

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Abstract

A study was conducted to determine the specific components of international involvement that lead to personal and professional impact among Extension professionals and near-associates. The project focused on the participants of the Polish-American Extension Project (PAEP). Data were derived from a 19-page questionnaire that focused upon participants' work and living environment; perceptions about the international experience; respondent and home Extension unit characteristics while in Poland; characteristics of the US Extension unit and community while in Poland; nature of the assignment in Poland; the US international Extension climate; reentry and adjustment; output and visibility; and key linkages. Over 95% of the participants completed the questionnaire.

Like variables resulting from the data analysis were grouped and summated to create variable blocks for analysis. Items that were not indexed were used as individual variables. Indexed and individual variables derived from the study were correlated with three dependent variables: impact upon project participants, impact upon immediate and extended family members, and impact upon colleagues and clientele of PAEP participants.

This study has revealed the importance of international involvement for enhancing global impact among Extension professionals, colleagues, clientele and family members. Those who have an opportunity to live and work in another country not only contribute to the development of that country, but they also contribute numerous mutual benefits within America. Lessons and practices were learned from this study that can lead to enhanced international impact across participants and near-associates based upon endeavors that are properly designed and implemented. There are three important professional development / training junctures for international assignments: before one goes (pre-training), while one is there (reinforcement), and after one returns (de-briefing).

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Cooperative Extension professionals have been utilized in many different ways to fulfill international education efforts. Because of the close working relationship with local clientele, Extension agents may often be involved in international exchanges or hosting foreign visitors. A number of international projects have included county Extension staff as well as state staff. These efforts have served to increase international awareness, understanding and involvement among Extension professionals (Place et al., 2000; Ludwig, 1999; Williams and Brewer, 2000).

Extension professionals are supportive of international involvement. A survey among Extension agents in the southern U.S. by Rosson and Sanders (1991) found that 86% of those surveyed felt that Extension programs should include more global issues; and 77% felt that constituents could benefit from programs with an international focus. Data collected concerning Extension's organizational support of programs with an international focus indicated that 37 percent agreed, 25 percent disagreed, and 38 percent were unsure of Extension's support. Other research has documented similar results (Andrews and Lambur, 1986; Knight, 2000; Ludwig, 1993; Ludwig, 1999). These results demonstrate the commitment and interest that Extension agents have for an interactive component of international endeavors.

An integral part of Extension's international involvement that has recently received attention is the personal and professional impact that is attained through such efforts. Studies are documenting the positive effects that Extension faculty and agents derive from their actual participation in an international endeavor. These professionals have experienced increased international awareness and understanding, incorporation of international components into Extension programming, improved self-esteem, and many have profited from a renewed interest in their Extension career. In addition, people outside of an actual international project have experienced various levels of benefit (Place et al., 2000; Williams and Brewer, 2000).

The Polish-American Extension Project (PAEP) was an agricultural technical assistance program designed to help address the needs of Poland in relation to agricultural production, management, Extension methodologies, and free-market economics. The PAEP was initiated in 1989 and ended in 1996 with a primary objective of improving the structure of Polish agriculture with the goal of increasing agricultural production efficiency and improving rural quality of life.

The project was established as a joint educational project of the United States Department of Agriculture's Extension Service (USDA-ES) and the Polish Ministry of Agriculture and Food Economy's (MAFE) Agricultural Advisory Service. Between 1990 and 1995, more than 100 American Extension professionals representing 31 land grant universities traveled to Poland to work on this project. Over the period of the project, 70 Extension professionals representing 26 states served one or more six-month assignments as advisors at provincial-level agricultural advisory centers (Osrodek Doradztwa Rolniczego - ODRs) in Poland (Place et al., 2000). This group of 70 PAEP participants was the population for this study.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine the specific components of international involvement that lead to personal and professional impact among Extension professionals and near-associates. There were three objectives of the study: A. to determine factors related to personal and professional impact among project participants; B. to determine impact-related factors among immediate and extended family members, and; C. to determine impact-related factors among Extension colleagues and clientele. The factors derived from these objectives provide the basis for the identified professional development / training needs.

Methods and Procedures

A comprehensive questionnaire was developed to focus on the stated study objectives, and an expert panel of faculty from Penn State University and Michigan State University then reviewed it for content and face validity. Prior to pilot testing, adjustments were made to the questionnaire based upon the suggestions and recommendations. The instrument was pilot tested among a group of individuals from Penn State University who had knowledge of international technical assistance programs. Input received from the pilot test group was also incorporated into the instrument.

Survey methodologies as recommended by Dillman et al. (1995) were utilized for the study. Introductory letters were sent from the Program Specialist of USDA International Extension Programs to state level Extension administrators for the 26 states that had participants in the PAEP program. The questionnaire was sent to the 70 PAEP participants with an informing and encouraging cover letter that provided an overview of the study, what the questionnaire entailed and confidentiality. Completed questionnaires were requested to be returned in an enclosed self-addressed and postage-paid envelope (Dillman et al., 1995).

The 19-page questionnaire consisted of the following major sections: work and living environment; perceptions about the international experience; respondent and home Extension unit characteristics while in Poland; characteristics of the U.S. Extension unit and community while in Poland; nature of the assignment in Poland; the U.S. international Extension climate; reentry and adjustment; output and visibility; and key linkages.

After two waves of personal phone calls and remailings of the instrument, there were 67 returns for an overall response rate of 95.7%. Subsequent data analysis showed no difference between early and late respondents. This is an extremely high response rate for such a comprehensive questionnaire (Dillman et al., 1995). The high response rate supported the researchers assumption that participants were deeply committed and sincerely involved.

Data were coded and entered into a preset SPSS quantitative analysis program. Basic statistical analysis tests were initially conducted for observation of means, modes, frequencies and standard deviations. Qualitative data from the questionnaire were entered into a word document and categorized for subsequent content and critical incident analysis. The qualitative data were used to clarify and/or substantiate findings revealed via the participant questionnaire.

Like variables were grouped and summated to create variable blocks for analysis. Cronbach's alpha reliability was conducted on each variable block, and standardized alpha coefficients ranged from .61 to .92. Items that were not indexed were used as individual variables. These blocks of variables and individual variables were correlated with three dependent variables: the extent of personal and professional impact on PAEP participants, extent of impact on immediate and extended family members of PAEP participants, and extent of impact on colleagues and clientele of PAEP participants.

Results and Findings

The three dependent variables utilized in this study are reported as perceived by PAEP participants. Participants (N=67) perceived that they received the greatest benefit (8.5) from the PAEP, followed by their family members (6.8) and colleagues/clientele (5.2). Each dependent variable was derived from an 11-point scale that ranged from 0 = no impact to 10 = extensive impact. The overall means and standard deviations for these three dependent variables are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. *Means and Standard Deviations of the Dependent Variables**

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.
Personal and professional impact on PAEP participants	8.53	1.38
Impact on immediate and extended family members of PAEP participants	6.79	2.78
Impact on colleagues and clientele of PAEP participants	5.20	2.93

Note. Each dependent variable was derived from an 11-point scale that ranged from 0 = no impact to 10 = extensive impact.

The majority of the PAEP participants were male (75%) whereas 25% were female. Most participants were married (73%), and the remaining 27% were either separated / divorced / widowed or single. Participants were well educated as 43% held or were in the process of obtaining doctorate degrees, 54% held or were attaining master's degrees, and only 3% held a bachelor's degree. There was wide variation of age among participants as most were in the 50 to 59 years of age category. Likewise, there was also a wide range of years of employment with Extension (1 to 40 years). The mean years of Extension employment was 19 years (Table 2).

Forty independent variables/variable blocks were considered in the bivariate analysis. These variables are a comprehensive set of factors that were correlated to the three dependent factors in an exploratory analysis. The independent variables are presented in the first column of Table 3. The mean and standard deviations are also presented, along with Cronbach's alpha for the indexes. Independent variables that were significantly correlated with the dependent variables were selected for inclusion in a multivariate regression analysis.

Table 2. *Demographic and Educational Characteristics of Polish-American Extension Project Participants*

Characteristic	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	50	74.6
Female	<u>17</u>	<u>25.4</u>
	67	100.0
Marital Status		
Married	48	72.7
Separated/Divorced/Widowed	10	15.2
Single	<u>8</u>	<u>12.1</u>
	66	100.0
Highest Educational Level		
Bachelors	2	3.0
Masters in progress or completed	36	53.7
Doctorate in progress or completed	<u>29</u>	<u>43.3</u>
	67	100.0
Age of Participant		
30-39	10	14.9
40-49	16	23.9
50-59	25	37.3
60-69	15	22.4
Over 69	<u>1</u>	<u>1.5</u>
	67	100.0
Years of Employment with Extension		
Mean = 19.22	SD = 9.35	Min. = 1 Max. = 40 Mode = 12

Table 3. The Bivariate Correlations for the Three Impact Variables and the Independent Variables

Independent Variables	Correlations			Mean	Std. Dev.	Range	Alpha
	Overall Impact	Impact on Family	Impact on Colleagues and clientele				
Level of Polish Support	NS	NS	NS	13.21	1.96	6-15	.712
Level of U.S. Support	NS	NS	.357***	15.25	3.76	5-20	.738
Prior Experience Index	NS	NS	NS	14.95	4.90	7-28	.817
Foreign Language Skills	NS	NS	NS	1.93	.92	1-4	-
Prior Interest in Foreign Language	NS	NS	NS	2.43	.94	1-4	-
Developed New Knowledge & Skills	NS	NS	NS	8.40	1.86	4-12	.651
Changed Attitudes About People	NS	NS	NS	9.82	1.77	3-12	.693
New Perspective on U.S. Extension	NS	NS	NS	3.53	.55	1-4	-
Changed Perspective on Self	.439***	NS	NS	2.83	.83	1-4	-
Career Opportunities in Extension	NS	.271*	.374***	3.21	1.67	1-4	-
Position & Relationships in Extension	.339***	.344***	.390***	3.63	1.45	1-5	-
Impact on Personal Relationships	.340***	.361***	.460***	11.03	7.53	3-15	.731
Impact on Your Health	NS	NS	.434***	2.56	1.68	1-5	-
Your Economic Well-Being	NS	NS	.291**	3.34	1.56	1-5	-
Satisfaction With Assignment	NS	NS	NS	9.28	1.01	4-10	-
County or State Position	NS	NS	.256*	.57	.49	0-1	-
Nature of Assignment	NS	NS	.280*	15.98	3.48	7-20	.762
Openness to Change of Host	NS	NS	NS	9.38	1.65	3-12	.729
Contribution Made to Host	NS	NS	NS	16.96	2.67	10-25	-
Family Members Accompanied	NS	.477***	NS	1.63	.49	1-2	-
Evaluation of Orientation	NS	NS	NS	11.03	2.61	3-15	.754
Level of Support from U.S.	NS	NS	NS	9.24	1.78	4-12	.607
Replacement for U.S. Position	NS	NS	NS	2.90	.81	1-4	-

(table continues)

Independent Variables	Correlations			Mean	Std. Dev.	Range	Alpha
	Overall Impact	Impact on Family	Impact on Colleagues and clientele				
Support for Assignment	NS	NS	NS	9.28	1.86	4-12	.640
Positive Factors in Participation	NS	NS	.259*	22.04	5.04	10-30	.872
Negative Factors in Participation	NS	NS	NS	8.50	2.70	3-15	.637
Extent of Work Communication	NS	NS	.458***	21.55	5.31	8-33	.776
Organizational Support	NS	.257*	.369***	13.01	2.53	7-16	.759
Prior Experience of Extension Unit	NS	NS	NS	19.24	7.25	10-40	.918
Visibility of Your Assignment	.373***	.373***	.553***	27.19	8.34	10-45	.887
Awareness of Your Assignment	.304 **	NS	.542***	21.36	5.40	8-30	.863
Office Ability to Accommodate	NS	NS	NS	2.15	.75	1-4	-
Family's Ability to Accommodate	NS	NS	NS	2.09	.80	1-4	-
Ease of Adjustment	NS	NS	NS	1.86	.74	1-4	-
Ease of Reentry	NS	NS	NS	2.00	.82	1-4	-
Gender of Participant	NS	-.282**	NS	1.22	.42	1-2	-
Marital Status	NS	.451***	NS	.61	.69	0-1	-
Age	NS	.249*	NS	3.71	1.02	1-5	-
Highest Educational Level	-.261*	NS	NS	3.70	1.05	1-5	-
Years of Employment in Extension	NS	.258*	NS	19.21	9.35	2-37	-

Note. N=67; NS = Not Significant. Alpha refers to Standardized Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients, which are only denoted for variable blocks.

*p< .05, **p<.01, ***p<.001;

Multivariate Analysis

The multivariate analysis was conducted through multiple linear regression. Regression is a technique that establishes the relationship of a variable while simultaneously controlling for the effects of the other variables in the model. A reduced or parsimonious model is presented for each of the dependent variables. All of the variables that had a statistically significant correlation with the dependent variable were placed simultaneously into a regression model. Variables that were not statistically significant in the regression model were removed, leaving only the significant variables, which are presented, in the following tables. Each table presents the regression coefficients (*b*), the standard error

of the coefficient (SE of *b*), and the standardized beta (Standardized B). The standardized beta allows comparisons of relative strength of each variable within the model.

Overall Impact

Table 4 presents the reduced regression model for Overall Impact. All variables in the model are statistically significant at the .05 level or better. The overall Adjusted R² for the model is .31, meaning that 31% of the variation within the model is explained. The most important variable in the model, as seen in the standardized beta, is Changed Perspective on Self. This relationship indicates that the greater positive change in self-perception as a result of the PAEP was significantly related to the overall positive impact on the personal and professional life of the participants. This suggests that among the ways participants are impacted by the exchange experience, self-perception is very important. This also suggests that international experience fundamentally and positively changes the participants.

Table 4. Regression Analysis of Overall Impact and the significant independent variables

Variable	<i>B</i>	SE of <i>b</i>	Standardized B
Visibility of Your Assignment	.042*	.019	.263
Highest Education Level	-.275*	.130	-.213
Changed Perspective on Self	.565*	.185	.343
Constant	6.755*	.837	
Adjusted R ²	.31		

**p* < .05, N=67

The second most important variable was Visibility of Your Assignment. Respondents that worked at making their assignment visible reported a more positive overall impact. Visibility of Assignment assesses whether the participants communicated with clientele and colleagues through calls, press releases, or newsletters before, during, or after the Polish assignment. This indicates that it is important for program participants to relate their international experiences to their acquaintances. Respondents with master's degrees tended to report a more positive overall impact than those with doctorates. Perhaps this is due to the fact that those with master's degrees have fewer opportunities for international assignments, or they may have perceived a better fit with the greater applicable nature of the international assignment, thereby valuing it more.

Impact on Immediate and Extended Family

Table 5 presents the reduced regression model of Impact on Immediate and Extended Family. Four variables are statistically significant in this model and they account for 38 percent of explained variation in the model. The best predictor in this model was Family Members Accompanied on assignment. Those participants who traveled with their families were more likely to have a positive impact on family life than those participants that did not. Position and Relationships in Extension was the second most important variable in the analysis. The personal relationships that are formed in an international experience are an important contributing factor to a positive family impact.

Age was the third most important variable. Respondents that were older tended to report a more positive family impact. Older participants may have had greater experiences to draw upon for the assignment. Furthermore, older participants are likely to have grown children who are out of the household or are capable of taking care of themselves during the international experience thereby making it easier to commit to an international assignment. When participants are younger, family participation can help counter any negative impacts on family during the assignment. Last, Visibility of Your Assignment tended to positively impact family. It may be that higher visibility in participation has the effect of justifying or rationalizing any short-term hardships among the home Extension unit related to the assignment.

Table 5. *Regression Analysis of Impact on Immediate and Extended Family and the Significant Independent Variables*

Variable	<i>B</i>	SE of <i>b</i>	Standardized B
Family Members Accompanied	1.960*	.603	.351
Visibility of Your Assignment	.071*	.031	.215
Position & Relationships in Extension	.458*	.221	.245
Age	.596*	.228	.228
Constant	-2.101*	1.010	
Adjusted R ²	.38		

* $p < .05$, $N=67$

Impact on Colleagues and Clientele

The last dependent variable and reduced regression model, Impact on Colleagues and Clientele, is presented in Table 6. The model had an adjusted R² of .46, and there are three significant variables. Awareness of Assignment was the best predictor. When participants perceived that colleagues and friends were aware of their assignment, they tended to indicate a more positive impact on colleagues and clientele. Visibility of Your Assignment was the second most important variable, and the nature of the relationship is similar to that of Awareness. Last, higher reporting of the Extent of Work Communication was associated with higher reported positive impacts for colleagues and clientele.

Table 6. *The Regression Analysis of Impact on Colleagues and Clientele and the significant independent variables*

Variable	B	SE of b	Standardized B
Visibility of Your Assignment	.095*	.041	.275
Awareness of Your Assignment	.177*	.060	.328
Extent of Work Communication	.145*	.061	.261
Constant	-4.408*	1.438	
Adjusted R ²	.46		

*p < .05, N=67

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this study have demonstrated that Extension professionals perceive personal and professional growth for themselves and near-associates through international experience. Blocks of variables examined included: their work and living environment, perceptions about their international experience, the nature of the international assignment, the U.S. Extension climate, reentry and adjustment, output and visibility of the assignment, and demographic characteristics.

The international experience positively impacted self-perception. This experience seems to have lead to new perspectives of new people and places and self-actualization. Participation in the PAEP was done voluntarily as a selfless activity to help people in need after the fall of the communist bloc in Poland. Additionally, American participants enjoyed a high level of esteem from Polish colleagues and

clientele. This further reinforced the positive self-perception. The cumulative effect of these factors was a positive overall impact from the PAEP.

Visibility of assignment was the only variable that was statistically significant across all three impact domains. This variable measured the extent to which the participant continued to communicate to others about the assignment. It is important for participants to understand that the experience continues even after they return from an international assignment. This may be due to the fact that the more people who are familiar with the international assignment, even after the fact, the more positive the impact on all domains. Visibility skills need to be an integral part of any type of training for international assignments.

It is important not to restrict international assignments to doctoral-level faculty. The data show that master's level participants benefit to a higher degree over those with more education. There are two possible explanations for this. International Extension work tends to be more applicable rather than theoretical and abstract which more closely parallels the domestic responsibilities of those with master's degrees. In addition, those with master's degrees tend to have fewer international opportunities, so perhaps they valued it more.

The family impact model indicated that participants whose family accompanied them perceived a greater impact among their immediate and extended family. This documents the importance for family involvement in these types of international endeavors. Also, older participants perceived a greater impact within this variable. This may be due to the fact that these participants had greater life experiences to share through the assignment. Furthermore, they may have greater familial flexibility as compared to younger counterparts.

Positive impacts on colleagues and clientele were enhanced through communication during the assignment. This included creating awareness and communicating with colleagues and clientele while in Poland. The nature of the relationship showed that if participants did not actively communicate during the assignment, it led to negative outcomes.

This study has revealed the importance of international involvement for enhancing global knowledge and understanding, and subsequently, the impact among Extension professionals, colleagues, clientele and family members. Those who have an opportunity to live and work in another country not only contribute to the development of that country, but they also contribute numerous mutual benefits within America. Lessons and practices have been learned from this study that will lead to enhanced international impact. Positive implications are more probable among participants as well as their families and near associates if they participate in programs that are properly designed and implemented. Furthermore, globally competent Extension professionals that are committed to Extension and its mission will result from implementing these principles.

There are a number of direct implications for those who facilitate international experiences. This study shows that there are three important professional development/training junctures for international assignments: before you go (pre-training), while you are there (reinforcement), and after one returns

(de-briefing). Important information to share for pre-training aside from culture, logistics, health and other basic issues includes enabling family members to participate. Pre-training also needs to consist of guidance about communicating to colleagues and clientele before, during, and after an assignment. Important issues for reinforcement while on assignment include communicating to colleagues and clientele, and utilizing means to increase awareness and understanding of the assignment. Upon returning from an international assignment it is important to understand that the assignment needs to be incorporated into Extension work, to follow-through on things that commenced on the assignment, and to continue to tell the story of the international experience. It is vitally important for those who facilitate international assignments to convey to participants the important factors of a positive experience through pre-training, reinforcement and debriefing.

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