Henneberry, David M.; Tongco, Adele; Henneberry, Shida
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The Role of an International Agricultural Programs Office in a Land Grant University

David M. Henneberry, Adele Tongco and Shida Henneberry*

Abstract

This article provides an overview of the role that an international agricultural programs office plays in a land grant university. The discussion is organized along the traditional functional lines of teaching, research and extension. The importance of internationalization of education is emphasized in order to meet the needs of a rapidly changing global environment. In the conclusions section, seven tips are offered that might help Latin American Universities to interact more effectively with their counterparts in the United States.

Key Words: International, agriculture, land grant university, education.

“Travel is fatal to prejudices, bigotry and narrow-mindedness... Broad, wholesome, charitable views of (human beings) and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one corner of the earth all of one's lifetime (Mark Twain).”

Land Grant Universities in the United States have a tradition of teaching, research, extension and international programs. In the last decade, with the advent of NAFTA and the rise of immigration and economic development issues as an important part of the relationship between the United States and Mexico, many Mexican Universities have started to interact more with their counterparts in the United States. For many of these Mexican institutions, the focal point for their relationship with the U.S. University is the Office of International Agricultural Programs. This paper attempts to define and clarify the role of the Office of International Agricultural Programs in a U.S. land grant University, and in the process suggesting ways in which Mexican institutions might work more effectively with their U.S. Counterparts. The traditional role of a land-grant university has been tripartite: teaching, research and extension. International Agricultural Programs may also be categorized along those same divisions.

Role One: Teaching

Internationalization of the Curriculum.

A global perspective is a key component of a quality undergraduate education (Acker and Scanes, 1988). Globalization of the agricultural curriculum is an essential element of providing a content-based global perspective for undergraduate students. The Office of International Agricultural Programs supports the international opportunities that provide faculty with the experience to teach from an internationally integrated curriculum. An internationally integrated curriculum has a “Comprehensive holistic approach of international components infused into the course content of respective undergraduate and graduate degree programs” (NASULGC 2000).
The important concept is the integration of an international perspective into the entire curriculum rather than relegating it to a segregated component. If the international dimension is provided through 10 percent of the material in every class the student takes, the problem of integrating that viewpoint with the subject matter provided is minor. When the international dimension is provided as a separated component, then the problem of integration is large and left to the student. A modern University cannot do a good job of presenting an internationally integrated curriculum unless the faculty has the international experience that serves as a basis for this approach. In fact, international expertise is an element to be considered in the hiring process for new faculty.

McCracken (1995) identified five reasons why instruction about international agriculture is justified in Colleges of Agriculture. These are the global economy, a need for cultural understanding, career opportunities, changes in schools promoting globalization and the global importance of rural development. If undergraduates are to complete their University experience with an improved global perspective, then the faculty must be prepared to face the challenge of globalizing the curriculum.

**Short-Term Study Abroad Courses.**

Study abroad courses are opportunities for students to gain international experience through a program designed by the University, which incorporates some subject matter content from the student's major while visiting a specific geographic area. At Oklahoma State University, most study abroad programs in the College of Agriculture are short term (about 2 weeks in duration) with an accompanying faculty member. There are three windows through which OSU offers short term study abroad courses: winter break (December 27- January 10); Spring break (the 2nd week of March) and after the end of the spring semester (May 7-21). These windows are the most convenient time for students to travel. Although other time exists in the middle of the summer, so many students get summer jobs that courses are not viable at that time.

Short term study abroad programs are a gateway experience leading to longer term international experiences for many students.

**Internships and Long-Term Study Abroad Experiences.**

Some students want to have a deeper, longer term international experience which is only possible through a semester long program of study or internship experience in another country. Many of the participants in longer term programs develop their desire through the gateway established by short term programs.

Long term programs require an institutional relationship that is impossible for an individual student to create in order to participate. Such programs must be established and maintained by academic institutions for the benefit of the student body. A functioning program will allow students to participate in long term programs in a variety of academic fields, with issues such as housing, advising, transfer of credits and tuition reciprocity already worked out for the students. Mexican and U.S. institutions can better serve their students by providing the relationships necessary to make long term study abroad possible.

**Recruiting.**

The recruitment of international students is an important activity for U.S. Universities. For example, Oklahoma State University currently has students from 117 countries on campus. Mexican Universities can help their alumni to find graduate programs in the U.S. by actually assisting U.S. Universities in the recruiting function. In return, more of their alumni might be in a position to receive funding from the U.S. institution.
Role Two: Research

In the academic field, research is the currency used to pay for career development. Scholars who publish in respected international journals are admired by their peers and economically rewarded by their home institutions.

Advancement in agricultural sciences in the 21st century requires international collaboration. The specialization of research fields has narrowed the number of potential collaborators on research projects and increased competition to achieve breakthroughs in both theoretical and empirical research.

The output of research is formalized through publications in peer reviewed journals. Encouraging faculty to collaborate internationally and publish with co-authorship across institutions is the best way to ensure long term working relationships.

In the agricultural sector, geography and climate play a big role in the type of research done at Universities. Many agricultural products, such as agave, will never receive adequate research attention unless Universities in their growing region address the issues. However, international collaboration can bring greater focus and technical breakthroughs faster than an independent effort.

U.S. and Mexican institutions have a long way to go toward creating an environment in which their faculty can easily collaborate. First steps include providing resources for travel, improving foreign language ability, recognizing international journals as important outlets for research results and rewarding faculty who make the extra effort to ensure that their research is at an internationally respected peer level.

In the past, many of the U.S. faculty who established international research connections actually did so as graduate students by forming friendships with the international students in their classes. After graduation, by remaining in touch, international research collaboration was easy. Today, with many countries (including Mexico) offering high quality doctoral programs through their own programs, we need to find new ways of establishing these international relationships between our faculty. Creating an environment where professional contacts can be encouraged, such as through sponsorship of a research symposium, is one way in which institutions can provide this type of framework.

Role Three: Extension

Extension education is a hallmark of land grant Universities. The mission to reach out to groups in need of knowledge, including those not fitting the standard definition of a full time student, has defined the role of the University in American society. It is the extension system that gives the modern University its presence within rural communities, relationships with agribusinesses and focus on applied problems. There are two ways in which extension activities enter the international domain, through programs focused at domestic groups providing international content and through focus at international groups providing technical content.

International Extension Oriented Toward Domestic Clientele Groups.

One of the great changes taking place in the United States is the growth and integration of Hispanic immigrants into the society. Official statistics now rank Hispanics as the largest minority ethnic group in the United States, at 15.4 percent of the population.
There are several notable contributions that Hispanic immigrants have made to the U.S. economy. These include (a) providing a supply of labor for industries where labor shortages might have caused severe problems (lawn care, horticulture, food crops); (b) revitalizing rural communities that were declining in population prior to a surge of in-migration; (c) adding to the number of entrepreneurs starting small businesses in the United States and (d) increasing the demand for educational programs for Hispanic youth. All of these contributions have made Hispanic immigrants a domestic audience for the extension services of land-grant Universities.

Hispanic immigrants working in the horticulture or meat packing industries will be more valuable to their employers if they increase their skills and knowledge in the industry. Programs providing that educational opportunity are available from land grant Universities, delivered in the same rural communities where many of the immigrant families reside. Also programs on family matters such as nutrition, elementary and secondary schools and community governance are available. Immigrants participating in such programs will have a better opportunity of success in their new country. After all, one in eight people in the United States is a first generation immigrant.

Another form of extension education oriented toward domestic clientele groups is education about the international marketplace for U.S. products. While the NAFTA agreement opened up trade between the United States and Mexico, providing large net economic benefits for both countries, it also created a need for knowledge about customs regulations, packaging, consumer demand in Mexico, border controls and other fundamental logistical factors involved in international trade. Extension programming is a mechanism through which groups can access the knowledge they need to increase exports of value-added agricultural products from the United States.

International Extension Oriented Toward Foreign Clientele Groups.
The dissemination of knowledge knows no borders, and groups in Mexico also constitute a clientele groups for extension educational programs. For example, in the meat packing industry, programs provided by meat scientists that increase the knowledge of employees in slaughter and packing facilities about meat science can greatly improve efficiency and quality in the meats industry.

Non-degree training is the specialty of extension personnel, and such training is special because it is delivered directly to a clientele group whose members can begin to gainfully employ the knowledge immediately (compared to a traditional degree program where the application of knowledge is postponed until after graduation). The immediate application of knowledge is what makes extension programming so valuable to the economy. Its value to the economy is what creates the strong bonds between agribusinesses and Universities in the United States.

Universities in Mexico and other countries have much to gain from emulating the experience of the United States in extension programming. One way to speed up the process of developing an extension program is through teamwork with a U.S. partner. The system of creating knowledge through research, developing applications to industry and disseminating the knowledge through extension programming can be adapted to other countries through teamwork and determination.

Agribusiness in Latin America want to enter markets in the United States for processed foods, organic foods, labor intensive products and traditional agricultural exports such as stocker-feeder cattle.
Understand the system of exporting under NAFTA, the demand for products in the United States and the marketing and distribution system for those products may be accomplished by applying standard analytical techniques to these issues. Dissemination of such knowledge to Latin American agribusinesses is the responsibility of institutions in those countries. Partnering with U.S. universities to develop functional extension systems is an alternative that can speed up the process.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this paper offers several tips for Mexican Universities who are interacting with U.S. land grant institutions. These tips are simple, practical recommendations for establishing a smooth working relationship.

**Tip One: Follow the institutional structure.** When initiating a program with a land grant University, begin with the office of international agricultural programs. As the relationship matures and specific activities develop, it may be natural to establish a direct relationship with the heads of academic departments, centers or individual faculty. In the early stages of a relationship, use the Office of International Programs because they can help you to negotiate the institutional structure of the U.S. institution. Like any large institution, U.S. Universities have complex organizational structures and occasionally duplication of functions on one campus. The IAP Office can help you to interact with the most appropriate offices.

**Tip Two: Relate to the Functions of Teaching, Research or Extension.** These are the three principal activities of land grant institutions. Most are functionally organized along these lines and if it is possible to discuss proposed activities in this format, it will be much easier for U.S. Universities to identify the appropriate counterparts in administration and function. Projects that do not fit into one of these categories may pose administrative challenges for some institutions.

**Tip Three: Meet in the Middle on Language Ability.** Mexico and the United States both suffer from a lack of language ability in the other language. This is particularly true in Colleges of Agriculture, which have many faculty and administrators from rural backgrounds without a high level of secondary language ability. To overcome this barrier will require effort from both sides of the border. Start early, keep an open mind and use interpreters when necessary.

**Tip Four: Seek Partners Where Synergy may Create Additional Resources.** Universities that work well together are those who can join forces to apply for grant funding. It may be the case that Mexican institutions will initially provide funds for projects such as degree training, curriculum transfer or other programs in which they acquire a service or product from a U.S. institution. But from a long run view, the best partnerships are those fostered on equality and joint effort to acquire the funds to keep the relationship going.

**Tip Five: Support the faculty who are trying to publish together.** If activities spawn a relationship between faculty members in which they are trying to publish together, try to provide them the travel money, communications budget and/or resources needed to succeed. Joint research publications between the faculty members at U.S. and Mexican institutions are proof of success and lay the groundwork for more collaboration in the future. It is the responsibility of administrators to funnel resources to faculty who are successful at publishing the results of their collaboration with international co-authorship.
Tip Six: Continually draw new people into the relationship, and remember patience is important. Looking back at long term relationships, it is clear that exchanges which may have seemed insignificant at the time, such as a short term undergraduate exchange program, may have long term benefits much greater than anticipated. Encouraging every program for exchange of faculty and students is one way to ensure that synergistic opportunities are realized. Patience is important because relationships take time to build, and only a small percentage of those created will turn into productive long-term activities.

These tips are not rules, merely guidelines that might help to make the development of a relationship between institutions in the U.S. and Mexico easier and more productive. Universities in Mexico and the United States have more in common than they have differences. Using the common ground as a starting point for collaboration, programs can be developed that involve a wide range of faculty and students.

The future of the United States and Mexico is uncertain. In order to realize the benefits of mutual cooperation for our two nations we must seize the unknown opportunities of the future. Universities can play a large role in realizing this potential through preparing their students and faculty for an internationally diverse future, and equipping them with the professional skills to address new challenges as they emerge.

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