

## **Bridging Borders: Organizing Short-Term Agricultural Communication Exchange Programs**

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### **Abstract**

This paper describes the efforts of the University of Florida (located in Gainesville, Florida) and the University of Guelph (located in Ontario, Canada, near Toronto) to jointly develop a unique pilot exchange program for undergraduate and graduate agricultural communication students. The program was designed to encourage students to think critically about agriculture, agricultural communications, and culture in each other's countries. During this exchange, nine University of Guelph students traveled to Florida for one week during their winter breaks and six University of Florida students traveled to Canada during their spring breaks. The exchanges took place in back-to-back weeks. Students met with university administrators and agriculture industry representatives, toured agricultural facilities, and visited cultural locations. This paper details the planning process that culminated in the two-week program, provides students' comments about what they learned during the study-abroad experience, and makes recommendations to faculty interested in organizing similar study-abroad programs.

In most businesses today, employers are looking for skills and competencies that extend beyond technical subject matter. Gorchels, Jambulingham, and Aurand (1999) note that cultural adaptability and work ethic are important traits for those being hired for international-related positions. Moreover, the authors write that adaptability is likely to increase with exposure to different cultures. Others have expressed the need to enhance American university curricula with international topics and to place more emphasis on "globalization" in general (Acker, 1999; Fugate & Jefferson, 2001; Moore & Woods, 2003; Redmann, Schupp, & Richardson, 1998; Tritz & Martin, 1997). One way to develop international competencies is through an international study tour.

Two other skill sets that employers seek in new employees are effective communication abilities (Herman, 1995) and the ability to make decisions

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and think critically. Professionals in agricultural communications have repeatedly voiced a need for graduates to possess strong communication skills in a variety of areas (Sitton, Cartmell, & Sargent, 2005; Sprecker & Rudd, 1998). The development of critical thinking skills in agricultural audiences has also been identified as an especially important need, based on findings that suggest potential deficiencies in students' abilities to think critically (Rudd, Baker, & Hoover, 2000). Research also has suggested a potentially important need to improve the critical thinking dispositions of agricultural communications students (Bisdorf-Rhoades, Ricketts, Irani, Lundy, & Telg, 2005; Telg & Irani, 2005). Pairing an international experience with these skill sets creates a desirable combination. But how can these important skills be brought together into an effective package?

The University of Florida's Department of Agricultural Education and Communication and the University of Guelph's Ontario Agricultural College jointly developed a pilot exchange program that represented a first for each university. The purpose of the exchange was to expose undergraduate and graduate agricultural communication students to agriculture, agricultural communications, and culture in the other country, while enhancing critical thinking abilities. Nine University of Guelph (UoG) students traveled to the University of Florida (UF) for one week over their winter breaks, and six UF students traveled to Canada during their spring breaks. Students met with university administrators and agriculture industry representatives, toured agricultural facilities, and visited cultural locations. Students' critical thinking and perceived international competencies were assessed both before and after the exchange using both qualitative and quantitative instrumentation.

This paper will explain how the University of Florida and the University of Guelph developed their study-abroad exchange program to teach college students about agriculture, culture, and communications in their respective countries. Furthermore, participating students' critical thinking skills and perceptions of their international experiences will be described, and recommendations for other universities that want to develop similar agricultural communication study-abroad tours will be provided.

### Process

The idea for such an exchange came about as a result of discussions at a professional conference in Kansas City, Missouri, in 2003 between the UF and UoG faculty advisers for the Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow. The advisers believed both sets of students would be intrigued by the opportunity to travel to a different country—still in North America—and the opportunity to interact with fellow students twice: once in their own

country and once in the other students' country. A study-abroad program also would be the stepping stone to begin a more formal agreement between the two universities for long-term study-abroad programs for students in any college major, not just agriculture or agricultural communication. The advisers talked on the telephone and then face-to-face at the two professional conferences they attended in 2003 (the Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences annual meeting and the National Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow conference).

As planning progressed, the target date was pushed back from 2004 to 2005. In 2005, UoG's one-week winter break was the week immediately before UF's spring break (February 19-26 and February 27-March 4, respectively). Therefore, the exchange would occur in back-to-back weeks. As far as organizers could ascertain (after discussions in their universities' international programs offices), this exchange involving two consecutive weeks was a first for both universities.

Each instructor secured the help of students to plan the weeks of activities. UF was responsible for all arrangements (except airfare) for the UoG students on their trip to Florida. UoG was responsible for all UF arrangements in Canada (again, excluding airfare). These arrangements included ground transportation, lodging, food, entertainment and activities, and educational excursions. Each working group consisted of three to five graduate and undergraduate students. Each student took one day and was in charge of the overall arrangements for that day, arranging educational speakers and presenters, securing restaurant reservations, and planning entertainment and activities. The only aspect of the day not managed by students was transportation. Because they were immersed in the planning process for each day's activities, students learned first-hand about special-event planning and coordination. During the early planning process, the UF and UoG planning groups met by telephone conference calls once every three months to discuss where they were in planning the events. About two months before the tour, the groups met about every other week to finalize plans.

Each group wanted to give students from the other university a taste of agriculture and communications in their country, in addition to providing some specific cultural experiences. Each day had a different theme; themes included "Florida tourism," "Florida agriculture and communications," "Guelph agribusiness," and "Niagara region."

The students learned about specific agricultural commodities and met with agricultural communicators and policymakers. While in Florida,

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students visited farms and companies representing the citrus, strawberry, equine, horticulture, and feeder cattle industries. While in Ontario, they experienced maple syrup production, Canadian horticulture, dairy cattle production, and wine production. These industry tours allowed students to learn about the indigenous agriculture of the province/state and hold open discussions with the farmers in those regions. Students also met with policymakers at the Florida Farm Bureau and with the Ontario Minister of Agriculture. These trips allowed students to learn about the policy issues facing both countries, such as urban sprawl, commodity prices, and free trade. To introduce students to the communications industry in both areas, tours were given of the *Toronto Star* and of the UF/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Communications Services unit. Participants were also given a chance to experience life on the UoG and UF campuses through student-led tours.

As for cultural and entertainment activities, both groups included a variety of experiences while trying to keep costs affordable. Activities held in Florida included a trip to Disney World's Magic Kingdom, a visit to an alligator farm, a day in St. Augustine (the nation's oldest city), attendance at a college basketball game, a taste of southern seafood, and a stroll along one of Florida's many beaches. In Canada, students enjoyed a "taste of Canada" dinner, a visit to a farmers' market, a trip to Niagara Falls, a day in Toronto, a semi-pro hockey game, and ice skating. Florida students visiting Canada were given the opportunity to see snow for the first time, while Canadian students got a taste of the humid Florida weather.

Of the nine students from UoG, four were graduate students. Eight were students in Guelph's Ontario Agricultural College and one was a student in computer science. From Florida, six students traveled abroad; all were from the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, with five from the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication and one from the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences. One UF student was a graduate student. The advisers also traveled with the student groups.

Many of the students who traveled abroad also helped host the other group when they visited, which helped establish a feeling of camaraderie and friendship across the border. Both groups had a welcome reception on the first day of their respective study-abroad tours. Guelph students developed an online newsletter detailing their travels to Florida. Each day, one student was required to take photographs, write a short article about the day's events, and upload the story and photos. Three students from each university who engaged in the short-term study tour received academic credit. To earn the credit, they were required to research an aspect of the

other country's agricultural industry and write a short paper about it. They also made a presentation about the industry they researched.

As for travel expenses, each university developed a firm budget for the other university. The universities tried to keep expenses (excluding airfare) to around \$475 to \$500 (USD) per student. To avoid having to exchange money, funds were collected from one university's students and then used to pay for the other university's expenses. However, because UoG had three more students involved, the institution paid UF an additional amount of \$1,425 ( $\$475 \times 3$ ).

## Critical Thinking

The tours and learning experiences provided opportunities to identify some ways to directly connect students' international study experience with their ability to think critically about what was discussed during the trips. The advisers involved wanted to examine whether an international experience would strengthen students' critical thinking dispositions. After receiving approval from the University of Florida Institutional Review Board, advisers developed a survey instrument based on previous research in critical thinking (Bisdorf-Rhoades, Ricketts, Irani, Lundy, & Telg, 2005) to gauge students' critical thinking dispositions. The researchers conducted tests both before and after the two-week exchange program to ascertain whether students' critical thinking dispositions had increased as a result of the study-abroad experience. Dispositions are trait-based, and would not necessarily be expected to change over a timeframe as short as a week; however, since this was an exploratory study, researchers felt it would be helpful to test. Fourteen students (six at UF and eight at UoG) completed the tests. The University of Florida Engagement, Maturity, and Innovativeness (UF-EMI) assessment was the survey instrument used to measure students' critical thinking dispositions. The instrument is a 33-item, 5-point Likert-type scale, with a demographics portion at the conclusion of the assessment.

Results from the quantitative measurements of critical thinking dispositions were not found to be statistically significant when *t*-tests were run on the data, suggesting that critical thinking dispositions did not change during the two-week experience.

Critical thinking skill—the expressed competency—was assessed qualitatively through content analysis of open-ended questions derived from the University of Florida Critical Thinking Skills (UF-CTS) instrument. The UF-CTS, a four-question, open-ended survey, was given to the students after the exchange, asking them for their responses about their experiences and thoughts during the program. Qualitative measures were appropriate since researchers theorized that critical thinking skill is contextually based.

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Some of the students' responses to the open-ended questions follow. It should be noted that during the two-week program, two major news stories involving U.S./Canadian relations took place: the U.S. border remained closed to Canadian beef after it was supposed to reopen on March 7, and Canada opted out of the missile defense system for North America. Overall, students said this experience opened their eyes to life and agriculture across the U.S./Canadian border.

### *Canadian student responses*

There were many important messages garnered from this experience; however, I felt that the most important message was that the problems Florida agriculture is dealing with are very similar to those affecting Ontario agriculture. The major issues that crossed borders were urban sprawl and lack of public awareness. People tend to think that the problems they are faced with only affect them and are unaware that others elsewhere may be dealing with the same issues. This trip opened my eyes to this problem, and taught me to be less self-absorbed.

The main conclusion that I brought back from this experience is that Florida has a thriving agriculture industry that . . . faces many of the same issues facing Ontario agriculture. However, I do feel that Florida is more advanced in the education aspect of agriculture. They are already spreading the word, and I believe it would be a wise step to analyze in greater detail the successes and failures of their initiatives, so that Ontario can follow suit and bring some of their initiatives to our industry.

One of the most unconvincing things that I saw in Florida is the way that the government is letting farmland be consumed by developers. I think they are thinking way too short-term and need to open their eyes to what Florida is going to look like in another 50 years. This is where I am so satisfied with the initiatives of the Ontario government and their more long-term vision.

My beliefs and opinions have made a drastic shift since my return from Florida. Originally, I had the "Mickey Mouse" idea of Florida, with tourists and a lazy, simple lifestyle. Obviously, I know this was not the case everywhere, but I didn't realize how much of an impact agriculture has on Florida.

I think the most meaningful message sent out was that as agricultural communication students, we must all work harder to increase public awareness about agricultural issues and the product our sector provides.

## *U.S. student responses*

Throughout the week we visited with the Canadian students and were exposed to their perspectives on the border closure as well as other issues in agriculture. Although we may have differed in our opinions, we listened to each other's views. Being on the other side of the border when the cow trade market was yet again postponed greatly impacted my way of viewing the trade agreement. Being in another country where livelihoods were at stake caused me to look at the border closure for the global good and in the long run instead of looking at how it was affecting the U.S. cattle producers.

The major conclusion that I have developed is that people do not know about agriculture. Although I already knew it, this trip has reinforced the fact that agricultural communicators are very important in getting the positive word out about agriculture to people who would possibly not know the facts. I also learned that there is not much difference between U.S. and Canadian agriculture. Both countries want to keep their people safe the best way they know how. The issues troubling farmers are also similar.

My beliefs on Canadian agriculture have changed due to the fact that I was not aware of Canada's vast agricultural industry. I now see that Canadian farmers have the same types of problems that American farmers experience.

Before this trip, I really only knew that Canada produced maple syrup and some cattle. I had no idea that Ontario had such good soil and the potential to grow such a wide variety of foods. Especially with regard to the wine industry, I learned that Ontario is producing some of the finest wines in the world. As far as culture goes, I had no idea that the "spirit of the cowboy" could exist anywhere else but America. However, I realized that being a farmer or rancher is about a way of life and an appreciation for the land that goes far beyond the Southern twang.

The most important conclusion I developed was that good agricultural communications is critical to the survival of the ag industry both here and abroad. I realized how unaware the average American/Canadian is about the needs of farmers and ranchers.

## **Recommendations**

The following are recommendations for agricultural communication instructors who are interested in starting similar exchange or study-abroad programs:

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1. For a weeklong study-abroad program, try to keep all expenses (including airfare) to \$1,000 or less. Much more than that will decrease students' interest in the program.
2. Identify someone in the country you plan to visit to help organize the activities in that country. Then develop a theme for each day of the visit. The organizers of this study tour found that a daily theme helped students understand what they were about to learn on a given day.
3. Start the planning process early. In this case, the two-week exchange took more than a year from initial discussion to final execution to plan. Study-abroad tours can be organized in a much shorter timeframe; however, for first-timers, it is recommended to build in plenty of planning time. Coordinate the planning. Meet frequently to make sure all issues are addressed before they become problems.
4. Enlist the help of students, recent graduates, and administrators. Students in the planning groups provided significant assistance to the overall program. They organized the days based around this question: "If I had never been to Florida/Ontario, what would I want to know/do?" They then planned the days accordingly. Administrators provided funding for the advisers to travel and meet with the touring groups. The recent graduates helped the planning groups arrange tours and provided meals free of charge.
5. Communicate the study-abroad experience to others. UoG students did an online newsletter while they traveled in Florida, and UF students made two presentations to students and faculty about their experiences in Canada.
6. Tie in many educational experiences and fun activities, but do not overdo it. Give students some "down" time. Build in activities and experiences that will engage students' critical thinking skills. A session conducted prior to the trip could allow instructors to introduce the concept of critical thinking, which could then be built upon through activities during the trip.
7. For logistical purposes, cap the number of students participating. Only 10 students were allowed to travel in the course described here. This made it possible for only one adviser to manage the students on the trip. The small size of the group also helped with tours; many agriculture locations will not give tours to groups larger than 15 or 20. This number is reached quickly once visiting students are added to students from the home institution.
8. If possible, tie in a research angle.

## Conclusions

The students and faculty involved in this project believe it was an overwhelming success. It allowed students to see and experience life from a different perspective. Students developed lasting friendships, learned about agriculture in a different country, learned about international issues (trade, open borders), and learned communication skills and issues. They also applied their two weeks of U.S./Canadian relations by analyzing, evaluating, and interpreting their experiences—all hallmarks of critical thinking.

While the quantitative pretest and posttest for critical thinking disposition did not show significant differences, posttest qualitative answers did show that students were thinking critically about their experiences. It may be the case that a brief international experience alone may not stimulate critical thinking. Students were not introduced to the concept of critical thinking after the pretest and thus may not have increased their disposition significantly. More needs to be done with the students in fostering the development of the disposition. However, students' eyes were opened to the similar issues facing both countries and specific issues pertaining to each country, which is a crucial step in the critical thinking process. Students in both countries were somewhat stunned that policymakers (the Ontario Minister of Agriculture and Florida policymakers) would take time out of their busy schedules to talk with college students. They experienced agricultural issues and major news events—border closings, free trade, missile defense, urban sprawl—firsthand from the other country's point of view.

Students at both universities already want to do the exchange again. The advisers involved are looking into ways to make that happen. Also, at least three UoG students have inquired or formally applied to UF for master's or doctoral degrees, and one student is currently enrolled as a doctoral student. In addition, the advisers and faculty in both countries have already begun collaboration on joint U.S./Canadian agricultural communication research grants. This synergy likely would not have come about without the study-abroad experience.

Probably the most telling component of the program is the friendships that were forged. Under the hot, humid Florida sun or in the frigid, snowy cold of the Canadian "maple sugar bush," students reached out to other students and became fast friends. They danced, laughed, and cried together. At the National Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow conference, students from the UoG/UF exchange greeted each other like long-lost friends. Bringing together agricultural communicators from two cultures today established relationships that will continue when these students

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become professionals tomorrow. These new relationships will allow students to call upon each other for assistance in the future—and bridge borders.

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## Keywords

academic exchange, study abroad, critical thinking, international curriculum

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