

**Colombian Rural College Students' Perceptions of an International Internship Experience
in Agricultural Science**

Carlos A. Parra Salinas

University of Caldas
Agricultural Science Faculty
Carrera 35 No. 62 - 160
Manizales, Colombia.
Phone: (765) 409-5967
Fax: (57) 68781517
Email: carlos.parra@ucaldas.edu.co

Neil A. Knobloch

Purdue University
Lilly Hall of Life Science Building Room 3-232
915W State Street
West Lafayette, Indiana, USA.
Phone: (765) 494-8439
Fax: (765) 496-1152
Email: nknobloc@purdue.edu

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Introduction & Need for Research

Rural Colombian undergraduate students need to engage in rural entrepreneurship to improve their economic and living conditions (Beseli, Warner, Kirby & Jones, 2016). However, educational opportunities for Colombian high school and college students to explore entrepreneurship across different disciplinary contexts and cultures are limited. Colombia is developing an international focus in higher education and engaging college students in global learning opportunities (Nehrt, 1993), which aligns with global topics such as cultural awareness, personal growth, social capacities, and respect differences (UNESCO, 2015). Colleges of agriculture should consider the importance of studying abroad as an experience for all students to develop their understanding other cultures and global perspectives (Brooks, Frick & Bruening, 2006). Agricultural education in Colombia should integrate entrepreneurship and leadership into the higher education curriculum. As such, the Colombian government has sponsored the Nexo Global Program in collaboration with a Colombian agricultural university to provide a group of rural college students a 6-month internship at a U.S. land-grant university. The goal of the immersive international learning experience is to help college students grow in their cultural and technical competence and develop business plans they could implement when they return to Colombia. The purpose of this study was to describe Colombian rural college students' perceptions of personal, cultural, and career development during a 6-month international internship.

Conceptual or Theoretical Framework

This study addressed a gap in the literature by exploring Colombian rural college students' perceptions of international internships and how this experience contributed to their personal growth and career development. The conceptual framework (Figure 1) illustrates the process college students engage in to reflect on their immersive experience using photovoice.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework



Methods & Procedures

Participants in this study were college students in agricultural sciences enrolled at Caldas University. They started taking college credits as high school students and started an entrepreneurship business plan as part of the dual-credit program. Eighteen students participated in the 6-month internship at Purdue University. They engaged in cultural, social, and education activities to help them grow and develop a plan for their agricultural entrepreneurship project. During the first week of the internship, the researcher provided information about photovoice methodology and ethics. Photovoice is a social research technique that combines photography and community action from a participatory perspective. This method is classified as a participatory visual method (Uscanga, Edwards & Waters, 2019). The PHOTO prompts (Graziano, 2014) helped participants write narratives about the pictures. The students could use their phones or other equipment to capture the images. Moreover, students were informed that

their opinions would not be judged, and their data would be fully encrypted to maintain their privacy. Reflections were translated from Spanish to English. Data analysis followed qualitative guidelines, including descriptive and *in vivo* coding to identify significant statements and patterns supporting the visual evidence (Creswell, 2012; Saldaña, 2013).

Results & Discussion

From the pictures and stories collected, four categories of findings emerged as contributions to participants. First, career development—students shared pictures and stories from crops, animals, or laboratory activities and recounted their experiences and possible impact on their career development or projects in Colombia. Students mentioned that this international experience allows watching the world and their work areas from another perspective. One student noted, “*The internship offered me the opportunity to learn completely new things for me, seeing processes that I probably would never have seen or learned.*” Second, cultural growth—students shared pictures and stories about social gatherings, housing families’ experiences, trips, and places or traditional celebrations. The students highlighted how they opened their minds to these new cultural activities. For instance, one of the students said, “*the contact with families in the USA allowed sharing experiences and learning more about the culture of this country.*” Third, personal growth—students shared pictures and stories of friends and campus activities. Regarding class presentations, the students highlighted the ability to overcome fears and the courage to face them. One student said, “*Putting aside the fear of sharing our ideas and thoughts before an audience allows us to create more self-confidence.*” Finally, negative aspects—students’ pictures and especially stories about sad moments, adjustment difficulties, or other difficulties that have affected international experiences. Photovoice allowed students to confidentially and privately express their feelings and emotions. For example, one student took a picture of the department store in the second month of their internship and wrote, “*This image represents my sadness at being in this country because I feel that it goes against all my principles, ethics, and purposes in life.*” A mixture of emotions were expressed in their reflections.

Conclusions, Implications & Recommendations

The photovoice method helped students reflect deeply on their own culture (Baseli et al., 2016). The international internship confirmed the academic importance for college students and, more importantly, for rural students to access knowledge, compare situations, and experience situations, which supported the importance of technical skills (Marrero et al., 2018). Students expressed that the main contributions of the internship were cultural aspects, personal growth, improvement in personal trust, and perceiving themselves to be capable of interacting in new cultures and another language (Marrero, Mohamed & Xifra, 2018). Students indicated a solid intention to adapt, interact and learn for personal growth and develop their entrepreneurship project. Photovoice can be a useful tool to help college students tell their stories and express their thoughts and feelings, which can support communication and innovation processes that increase the people’s participation (Jones, Glenna & Weltzien, 2014; Gervais & Rivard, 2013). This study provides preliminary evidence that an international internship may be an effective strategy to develop human capital for rural communities. This exploratory study is limited due to the small number of participants. Future studies should continue to include more participants and use mixed methods to determine if these preliminary results are causal, generalizable, and transferable.

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