

Finding The Inner Jíbaro: A Short-Term High-Impact Immersion to Puerto Rico

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

It is vital for the future generation of agriculturists to gain knowledge of international customs and agriculture due to interdependency with foreign markets (Connors, 2004). “A travel experience triggers a process of accelerated personal development, contributes to better academic performance, and improves social interaction between young people” (SYTA, 2016, p. 2). International travel will help better prepare individuals for positively impacting the agricultural industry (Rampold et al., 2018). Specifically, the Caribbean provides opportunities for agricultural development and cultural exchanges (Zollinger, 2022) without the need for a passport. Therefore, [University] personnel were interested in designing a service learning/ agriculture study abroad program to Puerto Rico during the 2021 winter break.

How it Works/Methodology/Program Phases/Steps

After obtaining grant funding, the student and faculty leads held an interest meeting for any student from the college. Only students who attended an interest meeting received the link to apply. The trip was designed for ten participants. The number of applicants far exceeded ten. Students who applied had their applications paper screened and then underwent an interview process with a panel made up of one staff member, a faculty member, and the student lead. The final ten were then selected with three alternates. Once participants were selected, the student and faculty leads developed the eight day learning trip in conjunction with a faculty member from [University].

Prior to departure, participants attended monthly pre-departure preparation meetings co-developed by the faculty and student leads. The meeting topics ranged from developing three personal learning goals to be met on the trip to learning about Puerto Rican history, traditions, culture, cuisine, and agriculture. Participants also created an educational and cultural exchange Zoom presentation on [State] agriculture and shared this with students from the [University].

While in Puerto Rico, participants journaled each night, reflecting on each agricultural stop and experience, connecting their observations and learning to their experiences and how this helped to fulfill their personal learning objectives. Agricultural production tours included; pineapple, coffee, plantains, coco, dairy and beef. Participants also had the chance to be guided through El Yunque National Rainforest learning about the interface between historic irrigation projects, the agriculture industry, and endemic plant and animal species. Participants visited and worked at a FFA chapter where the service learning project took place. The service learning project consisted of rebuilding a shade house that was decimated by hurricane Maria several years prior. We secured donated growing supplies, seeds, and pots prior to departure and mailed the items to the FFA chapter. We worked along side community members, and school staff who chose to join in on our efforts. Participants were also able to visit with a researcher at the USDA Farm Service Agency and were able to walk around Puerto Rico's Land Grant University. Lastly, participants

had the opportunity to meet with a marine biologist and began to understand the grassroots efforts being employed to save the marine ecosystem through a guided kayaking trip through a native mangrove forest and witnessing a protected bioluminescent bay.

During the trip, participants identified similarities and differences of agricultural practices in Puerto Rico and [State], compared and contrasted cultural norms through understanding and experiencing food, religion, ethnic backgrounds, and historical roots of the island territory, and evaluated efforts of sustainable practices on the island. Upon arrival back home, participants created a digital poster that portrayed their met learning goals. The participants also collaborated together on a PowerPoint to present to students, faculty, and community members to highlight the trip and review their learning and growth. Finally, participants completed a survey with questions pertaining to their experience on the trip. The data was then collected to be used for future trips.

Results to Date/Implications

Survey results concluded that all of the participants grew on a personal level in regards to the entirety of the educational exchange. All of the students also contested that they obtained knowledge on the trip that will lead them to having greater success not only in their respected careers, but in life. One participant stated that the most impactful part of the trip was:

Understanding the different mechanisms in which agricultural producers in Puerto Rico approach crop production and pest management... I was able to see ideas and concepts that are taught in classes that were being applied in cropping systems, of which the result was positive. It reaffirms what I have learned in my courses, and makes me excited to see my educational pursuits being applied in the field.

Out of the students participants, 85.7% strongly agreed that the trip supported their pre-existing perception of agriculture. One participant shared, "This trip gave me the courage to be a more authentic version of myself. It exposed me to different cultures and situations that I normally would not intentionally put myself in..."

Future Plans/Advice

The college plans on traveling to Puerto Rico for an educational exchange every year as long as funding is available. There has already been recent discussion of including other universities in these travel plans, as it will help aid in the breadth and depth of a global and cultural agricultural understanding among young agriculturists. The planning committee will also be seeking an industry sponsor in the future to help offset costs for students.

Costs/Resources Needed

We requested \$12,800 from [University] Student Learning Fee (SLF) Grant. The ecological tours expenses were \$3,900, food was \$2,700, lodging for seven nights was \$4,500, and the rental van for eight days was \$1,700. Students were responsible for securing their own airfare.

References

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