

Idea: Students Creating their own Learning Goals

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

Study abroad programs offer a multitude of opportunities for participants to immerse in and appreciate cultures from around the world (Karcher et al., 2013). It is well-established that when students perceive learning activities to be personally relevant, motivation for learning is increased (Bott-Knutson et al., 2019). Yet, faculty-led university learning programs, such as study abroad programs, tend to take a top-down approach in the learning process rather than allowing students to contextualize their learning experiences to their own situations. Therefore, there is a need to consider students' own career and learning goals when developing such programs. In having students develop their own learning goals in study abroad programs, they can experience higher levels of contextualized learning relevant to their own career and personal goals.

How it Works/Methodology/Program Phases/Steps

Impacting the trajectory of their learning, the ten participants who were selected to embark on a short-term, high-impact immersion to Puerto Rico were charged with the task of creating two to three individual learning goals for their trip experience. Goals were created based on participants' majors, interest, personal traditions, and genuine curiosity. Each goal was carefully crafted to gain a deeper understanding and connection between each student's own life and the Puerto Rico program experiences, contextualizing and making relevant these connections. Participants submitted their learning goals to faculty and student leads for review and input. The goals were then revised by both the student and faculty lead to ensure they were specific, measurable, and student-centric. A vast majority of the program was developed by the student and faculty lead centralized around each participant's specific learning goals; although this took more time and effort, this allowed all participants' needs and desires to be met. During the program, participants journaled daily, keeping an accurate record of the day, reflecting on the experiences of the day and the personal relevance and application based on their own learning goals. Participants were encouraged to look at learning at each stop through their learning goal lens. Participants were continuously reminded to compare their learning goals to the newfound knowledge obtained at each agricultural learning stop. Two group reflections occurred during the trip that was led by both professors. Participants were able to answer three guiding questions and build on one another's experiences and perception of what had occurred at that point in the program. Some learning goal examples from past participants included, "To examine both the benefits and hindrances of tourism throughout this territory compared to the opportunity for potential agriculture expansion;" "To investigate how generational agriculture/family farming is carried out and viewed in Puerto Rico;" and "To explore how tropical crop production varies from crop production in Northern California including inputs, operation styles, and pest management."

Results to Date/Implications

Upon return to the mainland, participants developed a presentation illuminating the development, practice, and achievement of their learning goals. Furthermore, participants shared highlights of the trip with the audience, composed of students, faculty, and community members. Returning students reported their appreciation and growth in developing their own learning goals. In the exit survey, 100% of participants reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that they grew personally from the study abroad program. In large, these results stemmed from participants creating their own learning goals. One participant said, “Without the learning goals I would have been passively absorbing information. Because of the learning goals, however, I was mentally engaged with my experience in a way that made it more meaningful.” Participants were asked to reflect on how their learning goals are playing out today five months after returning home and one participant concluded “I feel that the learning goals for me in Puerto Rico actually changed while I was on the trip. Seeing how the amazing people of Puerto Rico make ends meet, bring us into their homes and treat us like we are their own truly changed my outlook personally.”

Future Plans/Advice

If funds are available, college administration continues to support the Puerto Rican experience for students annually. California State University, Chico, uses the Student Learning Fee Grant funding model that can be applied for within the college by students and professors. A research study is being conducted to measure the impact of the trip. The results could catalyze more meaningful experiences for future participants. Future research will examine in greater detail the process of using student-developed learning goals to contextualize learning.

Costs/Resources Needed

The overall cost per student was about \$1,100 not including flights as students were responsible for securing their own airfare. However, the university covered the costs through an internal grant for California State University, Chico, and Utah State students paid their own way. Both universities are actively seeking continued funding. To continue the success of this program, the resource of time on the front end is needed to meet with students and help them develop their learning goals, and align them with the program itinerary. The student and faculty lead meet once a week for five months to plan and develop the trip and to review participants' learning goals. The participants meet a minimum of four times for pre-departure meetings to solidify their learning goals and trip expectations.

References

Bott-Knutson, R. C., Clay, S., Gonda, M., Walker, J., & Thaler, R. (2019). Assessing Learning Outcomes of a Two-Week Agricultural Study Abroad Experience To China. *NACTA Journal*, 63(1a), 44–51. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27128495>

Karcher, E. L., Wandschneider, E., & Powers, W. J. (2013). Emerging issues and sustainability in international agriculture: A study abroad program to Vietnam. *NACTA Journal*, 57(3a), 69-73. https://www.jstor.org/stable/nactajournal.57.3a.69?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents