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[Return to Current Issue](#)

## **Explore Your World: Professional Development in an International Context**

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**Abstract:** International travel is a proven method of developing cross-cultural competencies. The study reported here sought to uncover Extension agents' interests and preferences for international travel and barriers preventing participation. A census of county faculty in Florida was conducted using an online survey. The majority of agents expressed interest in international travel, particularly hands-on, group experiences with other Extension professionals. Barriers such as financial cost, time commitment, and work obligations were perceived to negatively influence an agent's ability to travel internationally. Extension agents can take advantage of opportunities at home and abroad to increase their cross-cultural competencies.

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### **Introduction**

*The world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page.*  
*-St. Augustine*

It is hard to miss the many signs pointing towards the internationalization of Cooperative Extension. A quick search of the *Journal of Extension* using the term "international" resulted in 557 "hits." The titles of the first few articles include such things as "Uncovering resources for your international Extension experience" (Driscoll, 2002), "Jumpstart your international Extension experience with farmer-to-farmer" (Bates, 2006), and the subtly titled "Leave home! International sabbaticals as unfreezing experiences" (Lev, 2001). A

common message threads its way through these articles: it is time for Extension agents to get out, explore their world, and enhance program delivery using their international Extension experiences.

## Why Internationalize?

Reasons to internationalize U.S. Extension are generally presented in one of two categories: professional development and enhanced organizational capacity. Professional development benefits include the formation of collegial relationships with international partners (Gallagher, 2002), increased knowledge about a different culture, and new technical ideas (Rogers, 2003). As an organization, Extension improves with internationalization because of an increased capacity to "enhance public understanding of global issues" (Ludwig & McGirr, 2003, p. 410).

It is the contention of the authors that the latter cannot happen without the former. County Extension agents are the cornerstone of the system. As Rasmussen (1989) stated, "It is the men and women at the county level—the local agriculturalist, home economist, 4-H leader, community and rural development specialist—who actually carry the university to the people" (p. 7). The development of cross-cultural competencies at the county agent level is necessary for Extension to help clientele understand and navigate a complex global environment (Ludwig, 1996; Ludwig, 2002).

## Participating in an International Extension Experience

Previous research has identified international travel as an effective strategy for developing cross-cultural competencies (Place, Vergot, & Dragon, 2005). A census of Extension agents in Florida was conducted during Fall 2008 using an online survey. The purpose of the study was to understand agents' interests and preferences for international travel, as well as barriers preventing participation. A response rate of 71.54% ( $N = 191$ ) was achieved. A comparison of early and late respondents showed no significant differences (Lindner & Wingenbach, 2002).

Program areas were well represented, with 23.9% ( $n = 42$ ) of respondents focusing on Family and Consumer Sciences, 22.7% ( $n = 40$ ) Horticulture, 22.7% ( $n = 40$ ) Agriculture, and 18.8% ( $n = 33$ ) from 4-H Youth Development. The remaining 11.9% ( $n = 21$ ) of respondents represented Community Development, Natural Resources, Sea Grant, and Nutrition specializations. The responses from all program areas are summarized in the sections that follow.

### Beliefs and Behavior

Agents had positive attitudes towards the importance of incorporating an international Extension experience (IEE) into their Extension work. Nearly 76% of the respondents felt an IEE was "somewhat important" or "very important." Approximately 21% of respondents reported having participated in an IEE in the past, 52.9% of respondents were interested in doing so, and 21.4% of respondents had no interest. Agents utilized few sources to gather information about IEE participation. The most popular sources were friends/word of mouth (34.3%), professional conferences (30.9%), and administrative supervisors (25.8%). Fewer than 6% of the respondents had used the University of Florida's international study Web site, other Internet sites, or flyers/magazines/newspapers; 43.3% of the respondents had never used any information source.

### Travel Preferences

Agents were most interested in short group travel experiences to familiar locations. Participating in an IEE with other Extension professionals was the most frequently selected preference ( $f = 27$ , 81.8%). International

Extension experiences of 1 month or less were preferred by 69.7% ( $f = 22$ ) of respondents.

On a four-point scale (1 = *Very Unappealing*, 4 = *Very Appealing*), respondents identified the most appealing travel destinations as:

- Australia and New Zealand ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = .86$ );
- The Caribbean ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = .94$ );
- Western Europe ( $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = .97$ );
- Eastern Europe ( $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = .98$ ); and
- South America ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = .92$ ).

The least appealing destinations were:

- The Middle East ( $M = 1.84$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ );
- India and Central Asia ( $M = 2.40$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ );
- Africa ( $M = 2.46$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ );
- China, Southeast Asia, and Japan ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ );
- The South Pacific Islands and Micronesia ( $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ); and
- Central America ( $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = .96$ ).

There was little difference in respondents' perceptions of the broader categories of developed ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = .98$ ) versus developing ( $M = 2.56$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) countries. The means, standard deviations, and frequency of response for each location are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
Perceptions of Location Appeal

Location	VU ( $f$ )	SU ( $f$ )	SA ( $f$ )	VA ( $f$ )	$M$	$SD$
Australia, New Zealand	11	7	39	110	3.49	.86

Caribbean	16	9	54	88	3.28	.94
Western Europe	17	15	56	76	3.16	.97
Eastern Europe	19	16	63	64	3.06	.98
South America	14	24	69	61	3.05	.92
Central America	18	29	68	51	2.92	.96
South Pacific Islands, Micronesia	23	32	57	50	2.82	1.03
China, Southeast Asia, Japan	28	27	61	46	2.77	1.05
Any developed country	24	23	70	35	2.76	.98
Any developing country	34	35	49	35	2.56	1.08
Africa	44	32	61	30	2.46	1.07
India, Central Asia	41	43	54	27	2.40	1.04
Middle East	82	40	26	15	1.84	1.00
<i>Note.</i> Scale: 1 = <i>Very Unappealing (VU)</i> , 2 = <i>Somewhat Unappealing (SU)</i> , 3 = <i>Somewhat Appealing (SA)</i> , 4 = <i>Very Appealing (VA)</i> .						

## Professional and Personal Development Activities

Activities that provided hands-on experience were considered to be the most important for professional and personal development. On a four-point scale (1 = *Very Unimportant*; 4 = *Very Important*), respondents identified acquiring hands-on experience and skills ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = .62$ ) as a "very important" activity. Activities considered to be "somewhat important" were:

- Working one-on-one with an Extension professional ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = .67$ );
- Socializing with Extension professionals or citizens of host country ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = .77$ );
- Visiting more than one area ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = .69$ );
- In-field lectures and labs ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = .75$ );
- Sightseeing ( $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = .77$ );
- Staying with host family/learning about a different culture ( $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = .90$ );
- Speaking and learning host country language ( $M = 2.99$ ,  $SD = .92$ ); and

- Free time apart from the group ( $M = 2.96$ ,  $SD = .80$ ).

Participating in research ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = .94$ ), attending classes ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = .91$ ), and earning academic credit ( $M = 2.10$ ,  $SD = .96$ ) were perceived to be the least important activities. The means, standard deviations, and frequency of response for each activity are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.**  
Perceptions of Professional and Personal Development Activities

Activity	VU (f)	SU (f)	SI (f)	VI (f)	M	SD
Acquiring hands-on experience and skills	4	2	35	128	3.70	.62
Work one-on-one with an Extension professional	1	13	63	89	3.45	.67
Socializing with Extension professionals or citizens of host country	5	13	56	91	3.41	.77
Traveling in country/visiting more than just one area	4	8	74	82	3.39	.69
In-field lectures and labs	5	15	77	69	3.27	.75
Sightseeing â museums, historical, archeological sites	4	25	76	59	3.16	.77
Staying with host family/learning about a different culture	12	28	69	58	3.04	.90
Speaking and learning host country language	14	28	69	55	2.99	.92
Free time to do what you want apart from group	9	29	88	41	2.96	.80
Participating in ongoing field research or performing your own research project	19	40	67	38	2.76	.94
Attending classes at foreign universities	23	49	68	25	2.58	.91
Earning academic credit through courses at foreign universities.	48	71	25	20	2.10	.96
<i>Note.</i> Scale: 1 = <i>Very Unimportant (VU)</i> , 2 = <i>Somewhat Unimportant (SU)</i> , 3 = <i>Somewhat Important (SI)</i> , 4 = <i>Very Important (VI)</i> .						

## Barriers to Participation

Agents were most likely to consider financial cost and work obligations to be barriers to participation in an IEE. On a four-point scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 4 = *Strongly Agree*), respondents "somewhat agreed" financial cost ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = .78$ ), work obligations ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = .67$ ), and time commitment ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = .81$ ) were reasons preventing their participation in an IEE.

Other reasons included family obligations ( $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ), the language barrier ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = .88$ ), a lack of awareness of programs related to work position ( $M = 2.64$ ,  $SD = .99$ ), and potential for being a victim of crime, terrorism, or unjust government action ( $M = 2.34$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ).

Respondents "somewhat disagreed" that a lack of interest in traveling outside the U.S.A. ( $M = 1.57$ ,  $SD = .95$ ), lack of support from supervisor ( $M = 1.95$ ,  $SD = .94$ ), and potential for contracting diseases in foreign countries ( $M = 2.08$ ,  $SD = .93$ ) were reasons preventing IEE participation. The means, standard deviations, and frequency of response for each activity are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.**  
Perceptions of Barriers to Participation in an IEE

<b>Barrier</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree (f)</b>	<b>Somewhat Disagree (f)</b>	<b>Somewhat Agree (f)</b>	<b>Strongly Agree (f)</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Financial cost	6	13	54	104	3.45	.78
Work obligations	11	28	67	70	3.45	.67
Time commitment	7	17	60	93	3.35	.81
Family obligations	25	27	62	60	2.90	1.04
Language barrier	18	52	77	30	2.67	.88
Not aware of any programs related to my position	29	40	68	36	2.64	.99
Potential for being victim of crime, terrorism, or unjust government action	41	61	47	27	2.34	1.00
Potential for contracting diseases in foreign countries	55	67	39	15	2.08	.93
Lack of support from my supervisor	68	57	35	12	1.95	.94
No interest in traveling outside U.S.	117	29	12	15	1.57	.95
<i>Note. Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Somewhat Disagree, 3 = Somewhat Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree.</i>						

## How to Get Involved

The literature clearly supports the importance of the U.S. Cooperative Extension Service expanding its knowledge of influences beyond domestic borders. In addition, 76% of agents expressed a high interest in traveling to several destinations and participating in a variety of professional and personal development activities, but only 21% have reported doing so. So the question remainsâ what can be done to encourage agents to move beyond casual interest to actually participating in an IEE?

According to Lev (2001), "If you set your mind to it, YOU CAN OVERCOME THESE BARRIERS!" Some suggestions for overcoming barriers include the following.

- Start with a short experience like a weeklong IEE. This is no different than leaving home for a professional development conference such as Galaxy, or for a traditional work activity like summer camp or 4-H Congress. If you find you have a passion for international work, you can gradually expand the length of future activities.
- Accept the fact that there will never be a time when you do not have something to do at work. However, if you start with short trips, you can still manage your work obligations with a little extra effort. If you select your IEE with discretion and share your experiences with your family, peers, and clientele, your program will benefit from your experience when you return.
- Before you go, share the details of the IEE you would like to participate in with your family and your peers. Help them understand why it is important to you personally and professionally.
- Bring your family along whenever possible. This might mean planning trips during breaks from school.
- Develop a plan to stay in contact with your family and peers at work before you go. Technology has given us many optionsâ check out Skypeâ ¢, Windows Live Messenger, and even social networking tools like Facebook and Second Life®.
- Consider visiting a developing country. The costs in a developing country are often substantially less than in a developed country.
- Collaborate with county and state faculty to develop a grant proposal to support your travel. The USDA's Higher Education Challenge grants and International Science and Education grants both include opportunities to incorporate professional travel so long as it relates to the project goals.

The reality is that finding the time and the financial means to participate in an international Extension experience will require effort and creativity. Perhaps your situation does not allow for travel outside of your state right now; do not be discouraged. There are several options for increasing your cross-cultural competencies that can be done without ever leaving home.

- Attend trainings on Internationalizing Extension; you will have better success if you learn from someone with international experience.
- Begin by hosting an international exchange visitor or getting involved with local or regional ethnic communities.
- Make contact with Extension professionals while on personal vacations; this will give you a network of contacts when you are ready to participate in an IEE.
- Develop a defined area of expertise that you feel comfortable sharing with others; this will help increase your confidence if/when you have an opportunity to travel.
- Learn the right terminology for the Extension system that you are interested in. For example, 4-H is unlikely to be listed as a program area in other countries, but many programs have integrated youth components.

Ludwig (2002) suggested participating in the Association for International Agricultural and Extension Education (AIAEE) as a way to learn more about international Extension. The authors of this article are active members. AIAEE brings together agricultural and Extension professionals from across the globe in the spirit of collaboration and for the betterment of the profession. More information about AIAEE can be found at <http://www.aiaee.org/>.

With many international opportunities available, agents should not be afraid to "jump in" the proverbial deep end of the pool. It is up to each individual to make international opportunities happen, but agents do not have to do it alone. Agents can work together in planning international experiences. These experiences do not have to be long and expensive in order to have an impact. The study reported here has shown that the majority of agents believe international experiences are important, want to participate in short-term programs, and would rather travel in a group than on their own. By developing contacts, looking for opportunities to lower costs, and teamwork, agents can be headed overseas sooner than they think.

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