

4-H International Visitor Exchange Programming Barriers, Challenges, and Alternatives

Abstract

The purpose of the Delphi study described in this article was to determine barriers, challenges, and alternatives related to planning and implementing 4-H international visitor exchange programs. The Delphi panel comprised 21 Extension agents selected from two southeastern states on the basis of their experience and/or interest in international visitor exchange programming. The Delphi panel identified seven barriers and 16 challenges related to planning and implementing 4-H international visitor exchange programs and 25 alternatives useful for overcoming those barriers and challenges. The study led to practical recommendations for educating agents for the task, recruiting and training host families, and preparing outbound youths.

Keywords: [4-H international youth exchange](#), [barriers](#), [challenges](#), [alternatives](#)

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Introduction

We live and work in an interconnected world (Mansilla & Jackson, 2013), a time of globalization, or evolving linkages between individuals, groups, and businesses that transcend geographical and cultural barriers (Berry, 2008; Lindsey, 2014). The globalizing business world demands a globally competent workforce with international knowledge and experience and cultural understanding (Acker & Scanes, 1998; Lockett, Moore, & Wingenbach, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Due to these factors, preparation of young people for the globalizing workplace is a challenge for all educational institutions.

Schools, universities, and nonformal education organizations such as Cooperative Extension are responsible for preparing youths for the globalizing workplace. Among other approaches, universities use study abroad programs to prepare students with international experience. Available literature indicates that study abroad programs have significant impacts on participants. For example, quasi-experimental research conducted with study abroad participants and nonparticipants within a group of comparable university students revealed that the study abroad participants significantly improved their functional knowledge about international affairs, world geography, global interdependence, interpersonal accommodation, and cultural sensitivity (Cisneros-Donahue, Krentler, Reinig, & Sabol, 2012). Of concern, however, is that study abroad programs are available mainly for college students. Opportunities for high school and middle school

students to gain international experiences are limited.

4-H international visitor exchange programs, organized by each of the state 4-H Extension organizations, provide educational opportunities that are focused on middle school-aged and high school-aged students. The aim of 4-H international visitor exchange programs is to develop international and cultural awareness and linguistic skills of participants (Boyd et al., 2001). 4-H international visitor exchange programs provide an opportunity for U.S. students to travel to a selected country and stay with a host family to gain cultural and international experience. The visitor exchange duration can vary from a week to an academic year depending on the program. These visitor exchange programs have expanded 4-H's global programming to 31 countries across six continents (States' 4-H International Exchange Programs, n.d.). Through these programs, students from foreign countries also stay with selected host families in the United States and obtain associated cultural and linguistic experiences (Mains, 2016). The U.S. 4-H program has implemented international visitor exchanges for 45 years, benefiting nearly 60,000 youths and families (States' 4-H International Exchange Programs, n.d.). Implementation of 4-H international youth exchange programs can help lay a foundation for understanding others (AIFS Foundation, 2014).

A number of researchers have documented the impacts of 4-H international visitor exchange programs on participants and host families (Arnold, 2004; Boyd et al., 2001; Mains, 2016; Odell, Williams, Lawrence, Gartin, & Smith, 2002; Radhakrishna & Ingram, 2005). Some of the documented impacts include development of cultural competence, global awareness, community engagement, communication skills, personal growth, and life skills (Arnold, 2004; Boyd et al., 2001; Mains, 2016; Odell et al., 2002). Additionally, investigations have revealed an increase in cross-cultural awareness among the participants. These experiences are focused on cultural effectiveness, global-mindedness, and lifelong learning. Arnold, Davis, and Corliss (2014) found long-term impacts of 4-H international visitor exchange programs on participants, such as motivation to pursue an international career.

The expansion of international programming and opportunities has been identified as an important step for providing necessary experiences for the contemporary workforce (Karcher, Wandschneider, & Powers, 2013). With this necessity, an intentional emphasis on workforce preparation contributes to Extension programming impacts (Cochran, Catchpole, Arnett, & Ferrari, 2010). 4-H international visitor exchange programs have great potential for preparing youths as globally competent individuals (Arnold et al., 2014). These programs constitute a mutual learning opportunity for youths in the United States and from other countries.

4-H international visitor exchange programs take the form of academic yearlong programs and short-term summer programs (States' 4-H International Exchange Programs, n.d.). A study conducted with 4-H Extension educators in Oklahoma revealed that they preferred short-term international programs focused on cultural awareness and service learning (Sallee & Lancaster, 2013) as compared to yearlong programs. Although impacts have been documented, the research on 4-H international visitor exchange program planning, implementation, and evaluation is limited (Arnold et al., 2014; Mains, 2016). Planning and conducting a successful international visitor exchange program is challenging and involves coordination of many responsibilities. We undertook a study to understand the endeavor of planning and implementing 4-H international visitor exchange programs.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of our research was to build consensus among 4-H Extension agents with experience or interest in planning and implementing international visitor exchange programs regarding the barriers, challenges, and alternatives of doing so. We defined *barrier* as a circumstance or obstacle that an Extension agent has to overcome and *challenge* as a circumstance for which great mental or physical effort is needed within the context of planning and implementing a successful international visitor exchange program. The term *alternative* refers to any strategy effective for overcoming barriers and challenges. We focused on the following objectives:

1. Determine the barriers an Extension agent must overcome when planning and implementing an international visitor exchange program.
2. Determine the challenges an Extension agent faces when planning and implementing an international visitor exchange program.
3. Identify alternatives helpful for overcoming barriers and facing challenges associated with planning and implementing an international visitor exchange program.

Methods

We used a modified Delphi technique comprising three rounds of response to conduct our research. Delphi technique is a consensus-building process for finding solutions to research questions. We selected a Delphi expert panel comprising 21 Extension agents in North Carolina and Virginia selected on the basis of their experience and/or interest in international youth visitor exchange programs.

Delphi technique is effective for reaching consensus among a group of experts selected purposively (Stufflebeam, McCormick, Binkerhoff, & Nelson, 1985) to identify useful information (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). According to Cantrill, Sibbald, and Buetow (1996), the technique "aims to guide group opinion towards a final decision and to answer questions through triangulation of subjective group judgments, analytical techniques and the experience of the researcher" (p. 67).

We used the Qualtrics online survey platform to collect data from the Delphi panel. In the first round, we asked the following three open-ended questions:

1. What are the major barriers you have faced when planning an international visitor exchange program?
2. What are the major challenges you have faced when planning an international visitor exchange program?
3. What are alternatives for overcoming those barriers and challenges?

We received responses from 20 panel members for the first round and analyzed the responses using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Through this process, we identified unique responses for each of the three questions. The first round resulted in a list of 16 barriers, 26 challenges, and 37 alternatives.

In the second round, we asked the Delphi panel members to rate the level of importance of each barrier, challenge, and alternative identified in the first round using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all important*,

2 = *slightly important*, 3 = *moderately important*, 4 = *very important*, 5 = *extremely important*).

Additionally, we asked respondents to specify any new barriers, challenges, or alternatives not listed and to rate those additions as well. Nineteen panel members responded to the second round.

Panel members added three new barriers and two new challenges to the original list. However, careful comparison of these responses with items in the previously generated list indicated that they were not new barriers or challenges. We defined consensus a priori as two thirds of the group (Warner, 2015) identifying as very important or extremely important the barriers, challenges, and alternatives listed in the second-round survey.

In the second round, two thirds of the respondents rated 12 barriers, 25 challenges, and 30 alternatives as very important or extremely important. We used these items to develop the third-round survey.

In the third (final) round, we asked the Delphi panel members to rate their levels of agreement with the listed barriers, challenges, and alternatives using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). All 21 panel members responded to the third-round survey. We analyzed data and determined that consensus was reached regarding items that two thirds of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed were barriers, challenges, and alternatives.

Results

At the end of the third round, we had identified seven barriers and 16 challenges Extension agents need to overcome and 25 alternatives useful for overcoming those barriers and challenges when planning and implementing 4-H international visitor exchange programs.

Barriers Extension Agents Need to Overcome

All respondents agreed that a lack of families willing to host a delegate from another country for the duration needed was the most important barrier (Table 1). The next three most important barriers were lack of time to devote full attention to the program due to other Extension commitments of the agent, high cost of participation in an inbound or outbound exchange program, and lack of parent knowledge about the youth exchange program (Table 1).

Table 1.
Barriers Extension Agents Face When Planning and Implementing International Youth Visitor Exchange Programs

Barrier	Percentage of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing
Lack of families willing to host a delegate from another country for the necessary duration	100%
Lack of time to devote full attention to the program because of other Extension commitments of the agent	95%

High cost of participation in an inbound or outbound exchange program	90%
Lack of parents' knowledge about the youth exchange program	84%
Difficulty of marketing the program to potential host families	74%
The excessive amount of time and the paperwork involved in setting up an exchange program	74%
Lack of agent training on responsibilities needed to plan and implement exchange programs	68%

Challenges Extension Agents Face

The Delphi panel built consensus regarding 16 challenges (Table 2). The two challenges with which the highest percentages of panel members agreed were finding another host family when placement of an international student does not work out with the originally assigned host family and making sure host families are willing to devote the time and expenses needed for a successful hosting experience. The four challenges with which the third highest percentage of panel members agreed were recruiting satisfactory candidates as hosts or outbound participants, managing personal concerns and circumstances of placing unfamiliar youths in homes, matching a suitable host family with an exchange student, and addressing parents' concern about sending their children abroad these days.

Table 2.
Challenges Extension Agents Face When Planning and Implementing International Youth Visitor Exchange Programs

Challenge	Percentage of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing
Finding another host family when placement of an international student does not work out with the originally assigned host family	94%
Making sure that host families are willing to devote the time and expenses needed for a successful hosting experience	89%
Recruiting satisfactory candidates as hosts or outbound participants	83%
Managing personal concerns and circumstances of placing unfamiliar youths in homes	83%
Matching a suitable host family for an exchange student	83%
Addressing parents' concern that they do not want to send their youths abroad these days	83%
Attending to help when there are problems the host family and exchange student are facing	78%
Managing risks associated with the program	78%
Knowing the responsibilities as a county 4-H agent/local coordinator when a delegate is placed in the county	78%
Preparing/training host families	72%
Adding another thing to an already full plate of events, activities, and requirements	72%

Planning and coordinating all logistics associated with the exchange program	72%
Giving the host families and outbound delegates the information they need to know that this is a cultural immersion experience, not just for sightseeing	67%
Having the information in a timely manner to recruit families	67%
Building a 4-H program capable of recruiting participants from, and putting the time needed to work with the participants on fundraising, team building, cultural sensitivities, and understanding the reasons why we do international programs	67%
Managing agent's time needed to plan and implement the program	67%

Alternatives for Overcoming Barriers and Challenges

The Delphi panel built a consensus regarding 25 alternatives useful for overcoming barriers and challenges when planning and implementing 4-H international visitor exchange programs (Table 3). Respondents unanimously agreed with the idea of having agents who have been through the process mentor agents new to the program, indicating the practical significance of this alternative. This can be considered as the best alternative because Extension agents with previous international programming experience can use their practical experience to help new agents. The next important alternatives were creating an online system to help keep the local agent informed as participants are recruited, seeking grants or scholarships to combat the cost of international visitor exchange programs, having a session about the country students will visit to help them understand the basic history and culture of the country, starting at least a year in advance in planning and talking with potential host families, gathering county agents' input when state coordinators make decisions, and using online technology to allow for international "pen pals." The Delphi panel also identified in-state and out-of-state exchanges as alternatives to expensive international visitor exchanges, although only 67% of the panel members agreed with this alternative.

Table 3.
 Alternatives to Consider When Planning and Implementing International Youth Visitor Exchange Programs

Alternative	Percentage of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing
Having agents who have been through the process mentor agents who are new to the program when planning and implementing it	100%
Creating an online system to inform the local agent about every step of the process as soon as participants are recruited	95%
Seeking grants or scholarships to combat the cost of visitor exchange programs	94%
Having a session about the country children will visit to help them understand the basic history and culture of the country	94%
Starting at least a year in advance in planning and talking with potential host families	94%

Having county agents' input when state coordinators make decisions	94%
Using online technology to allow for international "pen pals"	94%
Having regional training for host families	89%
Preparing a guide for agents to use in planning and conducting international programs	89%
Recruiting more families to share responsibilities of the exchange	89%
Using social media posts and videos to allow host families and exchange students to share their experiences may help in finding more families interested in hosting an exchange student	89%
Training agents to have knowledge and skills necessary to coordinate an effective exchange program	89%
Paying attention to select flexible and adaptable families when host families are selected	89%
Having "prepackaged" language and cultural mannerism guides	89%
Making sure that host families understand the communication challenges and cultural differences of international visitors	89%
Making sure youths are well prepared educationally and practically for their visit	89%
Adoption of clear parameters by national coordinators regarding when an exchange visitor breaks the rules and needs to be "sent home," not to an adult chaperone for the remainder of the exchange	88%
Having pictures uploaded to a Google drive for the family so that they can show what they have been doing	88%
Allowing host families to review applications and choose the international student they believe will fit best with their family	83%
Distance training for hosts and outbound participants with "face time" to minimize traveling	83%
Meeting and greeting of exchange visitors by the county agent when they arrive	78%
Having shuttles for international students to meet in a regional location for pickup, drop-off, etc.	78%
Letting state staff who are certified do home inspections and interviews with families	78%
Developing a 4-H curriculum that ties into the learning associated with international exchange	72%
Using in-state and out-of-state exchanges as alternative programs for international visitor exchanges	67%

Discussion, Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

The major barriers for planning and implementing 4-H international visitor exchange programs center on Extension agents and host families, and the barriers applicable to each group are interrelated. International visitor exchange programs demand much of Extension agents' time, making it difficult for them to conduct such programs due to their other Extension responsibilities. Generally, finding time for all commitments is a great concern for Extension agents (Boone, Boone, Smith, & Woloshuk, 2018). Extension agents who have not had adequate training for planning an international visitor exchange program would have to learn the

needed programming skills, but time constraints associated with other Extension responsibilities make it difficult for them to spend the time needed to gain these skills. With regard to barriers associated with host families, lack of families willing to host a foreign visitor is a major barrier. Sallee and Lancaster (2013) reported a similar situation regarding families' reluctance to host international visitors. This situation could be associated with another important barrier: host families' lack of knowledge about the visitor exchange program. In turn, their lack of knowledge may underlie the difficulty of marketing visitor exchange programs to potential host families. Along with parents' lack of knowledge about the program, another important host family-related barrier is the high cost of participation. Authors of another study also identified relevant lack of knowledge and high cost of participation as major barriers to implementation of visitor exchange programs (Boyd et al., 2001).

We identified 16 challenges that fall into three major categories: host family-related challenges, outbound youth-related challenges, and Extension agent-related challenges. Eight of the 16 challenges relate to host families, and six of those eight are challenges most agreed on by our respondents (see Table 2). Recruiting youths for the outbound exchange program and addressing the concerns of their parents are challenges related to participating youths. The challenges related to Extension agents center on managing one's time to balance the demands of planning, implementing, and coordinating an international visitor exchange program with other responsibilities.

The 25 alternatives that are important for facilitating 4-H international visitor exchange programs can be grouped into four major categories:

- *Orientation and preparation of outbound and inbound youths.* Exchange youths are the primary audience of the program. Authors of a study conducted to assess long-term impacts of visitor exchange programs also identified the need to pay due attention to recruiting youth participants for the program (Arnold et al., 2014). Nine of the alternatives we identified relate to youth participants. These alternatives are focused on seeking grants or scholarships to support participants, providing a cultural and language orientation for the foreign trip, using technology to link participants with their host families, setting and enforcing clear guidelines for visiting children, and coordinating transportation for inbound students. As well, the high cost of international travel is a concern to address during participant recruitment sessions. For those who cannot afford to participate in expensive international visitor exchange programs, in-state and out-of-state visitor exchange programming is a practical alternative.
- *Early recruitment and training of host families.* The host family plays a significant role in visitor exchange programs, and the selection of the host family is critical to a program's success (Arnold et al., 2014). Better understanding of the host family experience is helpful for program coordinators as they recruit, train, and assist new host families (Mains, 2016). Eight alternatives we identified are helpful for recruiting and preparing host families. These alternatives include talking to potential host families at least a year in advance, recruiting an adequate number of flexible and adaptable host families, using social media posts from previous host families/exchange visitors in recruiting new host families, training host families for the task, and allowing host families to choose the visitor they believe will fit best with their family.
- *Training to prepare Extension agents for the task.* Training Extension agents for international visitor exchange programming is critical, and a few alternatives align with this concept. These alternatives involve use of Extension agents who have international visitor exchange programming experience as

resource persons to train new agents, development of an exchange programming guide for Extension agents, and development of a 4-H curriculum related to international visitor exchange programming to assist agents in learning how to plan and implement an effective program.

- *Development of a program management and coordination support system.* Organizational support and coordination are needed for planning and implementing effective 4-H international visitor exchange programs. Development of an online program management system to recruit participants would be helpful for keeping local Extension agents informed during the planning and implementation processes. State coordinators should keep county Extension agents informed about exchange programming decisions to facilitate their work. Certified state staff should conduct home inspections and interviews with host families to ensure their appropriateness for hosting a visitor.

A review of the barriers, challenges, and alternatives we identified elucidates the need to pay attention to three major groups with respect to planning and implementing 4-H international visitor exchange programs. These groups are Extension agents, host families, and participating youths.

First, we need to address the barriers and challenges relating to Extension agents because of the need for their leadership in planning and implementing the programs at the county level. Training Extension agents to prepare them with necessary knowledge and skills is the best strategy for enabling them to implement the exchange programs. Training Extension agents by involving experienced professionals and providing ongoing necessary support will enable Extension agents to face their challenges realistically. Trained Extension agents will be able to educate potential host families and market the programs successfully.

Second, we need to address the barriers and challenges related to host families because they play a crucial role in international visitor exchange programming. These barriers and challenges can be addressed by paying close attention to the selection of potential host families, resolving their concerns through training, and matching host families with suitable visitors.

Third, we need to address the barriers and challenges related to participating youths because they are the target beneficiaries of 4-H international visitor exchange programs. Educating youths about the programs, addressing their concerns, and assisting with managing prohibitive costs of international travel through scholarships are necessary steps in addressing these barriers and challenges.

In addition to determining strategies to benefit agents, host families, and youths, we have identified topics for future research. We recommend the conduct of future research with host families to determine the challenges and problems they face when hosting an international visitor and their suggestions for improving the program. We also recommend the conduct of a study with returning outbound youths to identify challenges and problems they faced during their exchanges.

This research report provides a framework of potential barriers and challenges 4-H Extension agents face when they plan and implement international youth visitor exchange programs and outlines a set of alternative strategies useful in mitigating those barriers and challenges. Through this framework, Extension agents who intend to plan international visitor exchange programs are able to understand valid concerns regarding international visitor exchanges and find practical strategies for overcoming those concerns.

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