

Utilizing ELMs to Promote International Development

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Abstract

To address the growing issues of global food security and human suffering, institutions must better prepare students entering these fields with an education that provides experiential-based curricula. A partnership of Texas A&M University, Auburn University, and Sam Houston State University will work together to provide this education to their graduate students. Each university will recruit graduate students to travel to Haiti and experience the issues endemic of an impoverished country. Through their presence in country students will develop Experiential Learning Modules (ELMs) based on the four modes of Kolb's Learning Style (1984). Exploring their encounters in the country they will implement concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experience to deepen the impact of immersing in a highly underdeveloped nation. These students will pair up with a faculty member to document their course of in-country experience and development of a solution to the issue they choose to investigate. Designing this educational format using experiential learning theory will not only impact the perceptions and problem solving skills of the faculty and student participants, but the influence will extend to be used to enrich graduate curricula. These ELMs can be embedded into a course to bring international development experiences into the classroom enhancing the problem solving and cultural sensitivity skills of more graduate students.

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The global population is expected to reach 9 billion by year 2050. Consequently, agricultural production must increase by 70% to meet the demand of the growing population (FAO, 2009). A new generation of graduate students must prepare to answer these demands and universities must develop innovative ways to provide graduate students with high-impact experiences to become globally conscious leaders and problems solvers.

In the summer of 2014 a grant awarded to the department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications at Texas A&M University was used to take graduate students and faculty members to Haiti to develop Experiential Learning Modules (ELMs). This cohort consisted of four pairs of graduate students from the department with each pair supervised by one of the two faculty members facilitating this high impact experience. The graduate student pair was to travel to Haiti with their cohort to develop an ELM based on an observed need. During their time in Haiti they were to immerse themselves within the culture and the agricultural programs provided by Christianville in Gressier, the host site. Upon the return of both the students and faculty to A&M, the pair, under the supervision of their faculty member, were to complete an ELM detail their experiences and observations in Haiti. Largely, many of the ELMs were not completed due to other work taking higher precedence and students being unprepared to develop a sound ELM. This project will be attempted again with correct measures taken to ensure graduate students will have the time and resources to effectively create their ELMs.

The current project is entitled, *Developing Global-Ready Agriculturists through Experiential Learning Modules: Solving Problems of Food Insecurity & Human Suffering in Haiti*, and will be funded through the USDA's Higher Education Challenge Grant. This project

will rely on experience from previous projects to more effectively meet the overarching project goal of preparing graduate students that can create solutions to resolve issues of food insecurity and human suffering. Texas A&M University will be collaborating with Auburn University and Sam Houston State University to accomplish this goal. From these universities 12 graduate students and 12 faculty members will complete a short-term immersion experience in the developing country of Haiti. The graduate students will be individually paired with faculty members and divided among two cohorts. Each graduate student and faculty member pair will stay at one of two host sites and immerse themselves within the local environment. The pair will identify needs affecting the people and develop two ELMs while in Haiti, discussing the issues at hand. By pairing each student with a faculty member and completing the ELMs with additional time provided in Haiti, the modules will be dedicated the time and resources to be complete and be of high quality reflecting Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984).

Haiti was selected as an ideal location for this type of project being that it is the poorest country in the western hemisphere, while being less than 700 miles south of Florida (Sletten & Egset, 2004). In 2010 the country was devastated by a catastrophic earthquake that killed over 200,000 and injured another 300,000 (Margesson & Taft-Morales, 2010). This, followed by a three year drought, further exacerbated Haiti's food security issues with an estimated 70% of the populations' of some areas facing hunger (United Nations, 2016). Two faith-based organizations, Christianville Foundation in Gressier and Live Beyond in Thomazeau, will serve as host sites for both cohorts. Both sites offer a variety of agricultural, educational, and medical programs to improve the lives of Haitians living in extreme poverty.

Experiential Learning Modules allow adult learners "the experience to develop new skills, new attitudes, or new ways of thinking" (Lewis & Williams, 1994). The creation of ELMs

by the graduate student and faculty member pairs will serve to guide the absorption of their experiences in Haiti as well as holistically transmit their experiences to future audiences. These ELMs will be multimedia presentations created using a template with Articulate software. They will take approximately 30 minutes for audiences to complete and will contain objectives, background information, career exploration, and instructional assessments. Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984) will be the basis for the format of each ELM. The four adaptive modes of the learning cycle, concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, will be used to document within the modules the experiences of the pair while in Haiti. Starting with concrete experience, graduate students and faculty will immerse into Haitian political, social, and cultural environments through the programs available at both host sites. This will be followed by reflective observation where the pair will reflect to identify and address a need based upon multiple perspectives of local workers, community members, other graduate students, and faculty members. Next, the pairs will use abstract conceptualization to analyze the problem being addressed and examine the factors contributing to the problem. The module will be summarized with active experimentation to identify possible solutions to the problem and seek ways to implement within the community.

The completed ELMs will offer many opportunities for educational applications. Intended uses for the ELMs include incorporation into graduate curricula through the use in already existing courses or development of new courses around the modules. The ELMs will be made available to the public for free through a university hosted website. This will provide additional opportunity for singular use of the ELMs in other educational settings. The process of completing the ELMs through immersion in a developing country provides the graduate students and faculty involved experience in handling issues of food insecurity and human suffering.

The goal of this project is to better prepare graduate students that can create solutions to resolve issues of food insecurity and human suffering. Through the act of creating and sharing experiential learning modules dealing with these issues, an expansive audience can be reached to become more internationally-aware. This awareness will contribute leaders from graduates of international development programs to be part of the solution of global issues and prepare the world for a rapidly growing and dynamic population.

Reference

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