

Study abroad is valuable to rounding out ag education

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AMES, Iowa — Study abroad programs offered by colleges of agriculture allow students to step out of their comfort zones and gain independence and cultural awareness, according to program administrators.

Two students from Iowa State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS) who have studied abroad agreed with the assessment.

"It opens your perspective," noted Sonia Carrola, a junior in food science from Madison, Wis. "You gain a lot in different areas – academics, personal skills, professional skills. It helps to show you want to be a global citizen. I've never run into anyone who regretted going on a study abroad program."

Carrola's study abroad was a trip to Paris, France, to look at the sustainability of the food system there. She hopes to make another trip before graduation.

Connor Bollum, a junior from Austin, Minn., studying agricultural business, has traveled to Argentina, Greece and Spain. "Before I traveled (for the program), places I'd gone were pretty much in the Midwest. I wanted to get out of my little bubble. The trips help you have memories of a lifetime. You make connections, both personally and professionally."

"Now, I'm a little more confident I can do things by myself. I can communicate past the language barrier," he said.

The CALS study abroad courses are grounded in the school's curriculum, said Shelley Taylor, director of the pro-

gram. Each course has a syllabus, objectives, goals and evaluations.

"The goal is to give them exposure to their area of study," she noted. "They will have had an exposure to a culture they wouldn't have had. They also see there's another world outside of their sphere. That other world is something they'll be interacting with. They will be engaging with the global marketplace."

The college offers semester-long courses and shorter ones of 2-6 weeks. The majority of the programs are shorter-term, Taylor said.

Students have traveled to Central and South America, southern and eastern Africa, the United Kingdom, France, Italy and Taiwan. About 22-25 percent of each graduating class has study abroad experience, she said. The university has scholarship money available to help defray costs and also receives funding from private donors.

Culture shock a challenge

Participation in a study abroad program helps students gain skills such as problem-solving, adapting, flexibility and responsibility, said Kara Hartman, international academic programs specialist for Purdue University's College of Agriculture.

"The kids change while they're over there," she explained. "The trips can open their minds as to how big the world is, especially if they come from a small town in Indiana. But (travel abroad) can be tough; it depends on the person and how they adjust. That culture shock is challenging for some."

Purdue also offers semester-long programs plus shorter-term courses. The longer programs are usually connected to a university abroad, where students take classes and live in the dorms, she said. The school tries to match those courses with similar ones offered at Purdue. The shorter-term programs are led by Purdue faculty.

Australia, China, Germany, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, Nor-



A VINEYARD in the Sancerre region of France; Sonia Carrola, a student in Iowa State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, visited the area during her study abroad trip to the country. Below left, fellow student Connor Bollum stands in a soybean field in Argentina during a study abroad experience in the country.

(Photos provided)



way, South America and South Korea are some of the areas Purdue students have visited. In the 2016-17 academic year, 37 percent of the college's graduates participated in at least one trip, Hartman said. The university also offers scholarships to help with costs.

The University of Kentucky's College of Agriculture, Food and Environment has seen growth in its education abroad program, especially in the last 10 years, said Amanda Saha, director of career development and academic enrichment for the college.

"This is a great opportunity for students to experience academic courses and life in general outside of a classroom," she noted. "The experience is highly valuable. As a land grant institution, we have faculty in every department doing work abroad."

The college requires an academic enrichment experience, either as an internship or a trip abroad, she said. "Taking an entire semester abroad is less popular with students than the shorter-term programs," Saha noted. "It's actually far more affordable to travel for an entire semester but the students don't always see it that way. If we can get a student to think about semesters, those are the best opportunities for young people to become more culturally competent, learn the language and become immersed in the culture."

The courses abroad are just like those offered on campus, she said. Students have a syllabus, learning outcomes, assignments and attendance is taken. Last year, 175 students in the agriculture college participated in education abroad programs. Students have gone to Argentina, France, Italy, Japan, Korea and the United Kingdom.

Program for freshmen

To get students interested in a semes-

ter-long program, the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) at the University of Illinois has a shorter-term session for freshmen, said Jessa Barnard, director of the study abroad program.

The college offers an eight-week Caribbean agriculture course in the fall semester. Over the following winter break, students travel for 12-15 days to countries such as the Dominican Republic, Guatemala and Jamaica, and to Puerto Rico.

"If students are involved as freshmen in the faculty-led, shorter programs, over winter break, we see an influx of those going abroad at the semester level later on," she said. "There are lots of perceived barriers, but not actual barriers, to taking a semester away from campus. Maybe they don't want to leave campus during football season, for example."

ACES has about 20 exchange agreements with universities and small colleges overseas. The college has a database of all courses students have taken abroad. By using the database, students will know what courses will count toward their degree.

Illinois students have traveled to Brazil, Costa Rica, Jamaica, Sierra Leone and Tanzania.

"We try to match a program with a student's interests, abilities and major," Barnard said. "If they're in my office, they're probably thinking about studying abroad."

"If they seem hesitant between a semester or shorter program, I ask why. Being abroad for the longer term gives them a different level of independence than if they're here."

Generally, 37-39 percent of the college's students participate in study abroad programs in a given year, she explained.