

STUDY ABROAD

by Dr. Joan Solaun

As interest grows in creating meaningful overseas study opportunities for undergraduates, so does the awareness of the need to expand the participant pool to include students in traditionally "professional" curricula: engineering, agriculture, business and law in programs overseas

We'll be devoting this column over the next year to interviews with individuals such as academic deans and faculty who are in a key position to influence future developments of study abroad in professional and technical fields. This series begins with someone close to home, Assistant Dean Charles Olson of the University of Illinois College of Agriculture.

Q. Why is it so important for students in agriculture-related disciplines in particular to be encouraged to study overseas as undergraduates?

A: From a purely pragmatic standpoint, it is a fact that at least one third of the Illinois corn and soy bean harvest is sold abroad. Because overseas markets are crucial to our own economy, our students must be able to deal with a global marketplace and think internationally. Our graduates entering the world of agribusiness will be working for companies involved in joint ventures in Russia, eastern Europe and the newly-independent central Asian states, for example. Students who join these companies will play an important role in helping these nations in the transition to a market economy.

But there is another important reason. Many Americans in the field of agriculture have had an awareness of their service

role, or humanitarian responsibility. They will now see this service as including the world beyond their state and country. Today, the United States is being asked to help the newly-independent nations learn how to feed themselves. Early exposure to the international scene will heighten our students' dedication to world humanitarian service and sensitize them to the need to think internationally as they go forward into the workplace after graduation.

Q. But don't most students in the College of Agriculture end up going to English-speaking countries? How can this contribute to their understanding of food problems in third world emerging nations?

A: It is true that a semester in Australia, currently a popular choice, may not expose students directly to problems that will appeal to their humanitarian impulses. What is important is that they have been exposed to a different world beyond our borders. This includes travel within the vast continent of Australia itself, as well as the opportunity to stop off in many places in south east Asia, helping them to appreciate the relative status of agriculture in countries outside of the United States.

Q. Aren't most Colleges of Agriculture in this country already involved in international activities which originated from Agency for International Development and other agency-sponsored agricultural development activities?

A: It is true that in the last 20 to 30 years Land Grant Colleges of Agriculture have been assuming an important role in the development of agriculture in third world countries. It is natural to assume that if a college is involved in agricultural development projects in India, for example, these would impact on undergraduates in the college as well. This is not the case, however. Only a small number of faculty are actually committed to this international effort, and there is little relationship between this work at the faculty level and the undergraduates.

Q. Can you tell me about the kinds of students who enroll in agriculture in terms of the potential for participation in overseas programs?

A: Agriculture students have been more parochial in their views than the society at large. Traditionally, they have come from small rural communities and have not been inclined to take off to some unknown part of the world to study.

In the last 15 years, this population has changed. Now only 25 percent come from farm backgrounds. The majority are graduates of large suburban high schools where as many as 90 percent are college bound. Of this year's entering freshmen, 92 percent have had two or more years of foreign language. Even the rural community students come from families in leadership positions in these communities. The typical family in this category will have hosted international visitors, and been ac-



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live in organizations with an international focus. They will more likely have encouraged their son or daughter to travel abroad with a high school group.

Q. What makes the greatest impact on students exposed to agriculture abroad?

A: When they discover firsthand that there are not many countries that spend as small a percentage of their income on food as we do in the United States. The average American spends only 18 percent of the family monthly paycheck on food. In Russia, 95 to 98 percent of an average monthly salary goes toward feeding the family. The need for better production and distribution systems, the major cause of these disparities, is then easier to understand.

Q. What is the best type of program for your professional students?

A: For professional students in all fields, the ideal program is one where classroom learning is complemented by direct observation and practical experience. For students in foreign language settings, coursework must include specially-designed language classes with emphasis on the "hands-on" technical vocabulary of the profession, and a class related to the culture of the country. Other courses can be added as needed. There is also a need for the kind of direct experience, whether it be on a farm or in an industrial setting, which gives students first-hand exposure to the working realities of local agriculture.

For these programs to help resolve



Ass't. Dean Charles Olson

some of the long range problems of nations in transition to a market economy, we believe the most effective approach is to develop a reciprocal exchange program such as the one we now have with the St. Petersburg State Agricultural University. Sponsored by both universities and USIA, six students spend eight weeks in the summer in a combined program of formal instruction, field trips and internships to become aware of the role of agriculture in the host environment. This reinforces the development process, as both sides take what they have seen and use this to work toward the creation and implementation of better production and distribution systems.

In addition to the program in Russia, the College of Agriculture at Illinois now has groups of students studying in Japan, Australia, Argentina, Great Britain and, as of next year, China. Furthermore, many of our students directly enroll in agriculture courses at universities overseas. This is now particularly true of students going to Britain, Australia and Argentina.

Q. What is the best length for these programs in a professional curriculum?

A: Ideally, students should spend a semester or a year abroad. The reality is that students may be more willing to go for an eight-week experience, allowing them to get their feet wet and their eyes opened to an appreciation for other cultures and international relationships.

Q. How have you encouraged this interest in study abroad?

A. First, we have sent the message out to students that this is important for their present and future careers. We send letters and organize informational meetings on opportunities abroad, work to promote foreign language enrollments, and target for admission graduating high school seniors interested in agriculture who have four years of foreign language.

Our original philosophy was for

our students to have just enough foreign language to survive in a foreign setting where a special program would be developed for them. But as students return, uniformly their message is that they would have benefited much more had they known more of the foreign language. We are now thinking of a two-track approach: continue the "eye opener" special short programs for students with only one year of foreign language, but at the same time, concentrate more effort on the foreign language enrollments of our entering freshmen so that they will have two years of that language under their belts by the time they are juniors. This will greatly expand their opportunities and ability to learn and contribute overseas. Finally, we work with students individually to enable them to fit this experience into their overall curricular plan. I must say that I count heavily upon a strong campus Study Abroad Office to encourage us along the way and work out many of the administrative details.

Q. Isn't money a barrier for many of your students?

A. As a college, we have made a commitment to promote study abroad. We have found that our alumnae network and other constituencies are willing to help us with this. Providing some financial incentive to students not only helps the budget crunch, but it sends a strong message to them, to their families and fellow students: we want you to have this experience.

Finally, we want readers to know that we believe all students should be more aware of the world around them, no matter what their field of study may be. We think that many of our colleagues who have seen the impact of study abroad on our returning students will agree that this is one of the most important, life-changing experiences we can give our students. □

Charles Olson has degrees in Agricultural Economics, Student Personnel and Higher Education Administration. He has administered the Study Abroad program within the College of Agriculture for the past six years.