

## The Student-Citizen and Study Abroad

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**W**hat is expected of citizens and how does a college education contribute to citizenship? Undoubtedly, a list could be extensive, but we suggest that there is a long democratic tradition that views education as a necessary condition for a viable nation and that the accelerating pace of globalization makes an international component an important part of that education.



I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.—*Thomas Jefferson*

Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education.—*Franklin D. Roosevelt*



...at least one college where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.—*Morrill Act of 1862 establishing Land Grant Institutions*

Although many foresters have ties to a land grant institution, we include the brief quote from its enabling legislation because of the early role of those institutions in the broader development of the United States as a nation with an educated citizenry. Forestry curricula are packed with the courses and information that are needed for new employees in the workplace. Students graduate with field skills, a background in essential policy, GIS techniques, . . . the list goes on. In addition, softer management, communication, and people skills are incorporated throughout the curriculum. These are classes that transform high school students into productive employees. These are the “practical” components of the Morrill Act.

As the three quotations above illustrate, education was viewed by the federal government as both a means to develop practical skills, such as those needed by foresters and also those “liberal” (in the sense that the word is used in the Morrill Act) skills required of an informed national citizenry, an essential component of the American democratic tradition. In this Commentary, we illustrate the value of study abroad programs in the development of both good citizens and good employees. We believe the two are

linked; being a productive employee and being a contributing member of society are parts of being a good citizen.

Today, foresters face an international world much different from that of Morrill’s time. As both citizens and foresters they should be cognizant of the present global challenges and opportunities. The Society of American Foresters (SAF) Web page for the International Forestry Working Group is filled with recent news articles on the international dimensions of forestry. *The Forestry Source* routinely carries international stories. During the economic downturn from 2007 to 2012 the value of US exports of forest products grew 18%. International economics, policy, and the big picture of biodiversity and invasive species are only part of the value of an international perspective. People must be able to work effectively with each other, understanding how to recognize, appreciate and, at times, overcome cultural differences. Global issues surround us and study abroad is one path to global competence and awareness. Although long-term study abroad is available to natural resource students, prerequisites and course sequencing may make it difficult for students in natural resources to engage in long-term study abroad unless they are willing to spend an extra academic term in college. Critics of short-term study abroad contend that a program of only a few weeks will not have a significant impact on students.

We believe it is not necessarily an issue of how long individuals spend in an international study pursuit, but how well they spend their time. Preparation before departure allows effective use of time once abroad. Meaningful, innovative, and creative tasks and exercises while abroad with focused program linkages between people and the land provide the core of a study abroad course that accomplishes much more than the “tourist track” or recreational college pursuit. Finally, students synthesize and reflect on their experiences on their return. We provide two examples of successful study abroad programs and how they provide long-term benefits to students and the nation.

For 14 years, Oklahoma State has run a 16- to 18-day study abroad program in Central and South America. The program started as a relatively passive observer experience and evolved to engage students with people and their culture in a diverse array of community, business, and natural resource settings: homes, hillside farms, microenterprises, schools, nongovernment programs, marketplaces, protected areas, and agro-export ventures. Students and faculty interact with people from all walks of life, working side by side in their daily chores or community development projects and learning directly from them. Participants

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This commentary was developed in collaboration with members of the Society of American Foresters (SAF) World Forestry Committee. This national committee was chartered in 1969 to advise and assist the SAF Council and its members to develop and implement effective international programs and activities within the scope of the Society's stated policy on world forestry. Committee responsibilities include evaluating SAF policies, position statements, task force reports, journals, technical reports, and other documents with respect to their content and implications for world forestry, administering and fundraising for the Bob and Ann Gregory Award, and monitoring issues and opinions that have domestic and international implications and bring them to the attention of the Council and SAF membership. Contact World Forestry Committee Chair Michael Jacobson (mgi2@psu.edu) for more information about the committee goals and objectives.

learn about the lives of those less privileged by rolling up their sleeves and engaging in the daily chores—gathering water from the village well, making tortillas over an open-flame cookstove in a smoke-filled kitchen, and hiking up to the hillside cornfield to cultivate a crop on a slope of rock and thin soil. By sharing hard work and a simple meal, students experience a humbling, memorable, and life-changing day with a family and come away with a sense of understanding and compassion that no college textbook or class lecture could ever deliver as effectively. In the process, students also gain an understanding of the dramatic differences between living in a developing nation and their lifestyle in the United States. Students recognize and appreciate the value of community capacity-building and sustainable living for all people regardless of nationality, culture, socioeconomic status, and ideology. Further, they develop cognizance and appreciation of the reality that all people aspire to higher-order needs beyond subsistence living and that there are many benchmarks of happiness, prosperity, and quality in life beyond the acquisition and ownership of material possessions; among them are strong family ties, a sense of community, and self esteem, none of which depend on one's nationality. The change in perspective

between their predeparture discussion and synthesis after return makes it evident that students grasp the cultural and technical differences.

The Oklahoma State study abroad program has triggered the realization in participants that our world is far more complex than they previously imagined and that the path to understanding global issues and identifying functional solutions must include an understanding of culture and its associated nuances in any geographic setting. It has spawned a vision that we all can and should try to be more than we currently are, as members of a global community. It has stimulated a quest for expanded pursuits for students. Several participants in the program later embarked on full-semester study abroad programs, internships, and Fulbright projects abroad; volunteered for Peace Corps assignments; and pursued graduate study and careers in international programs. Short-term programs cultivate the soil and plant the seeds of international citizenry. The heightened awareness and understanding that students gain through such experiences and their enhanced ability and confidence to function in an increasingly complex world are transcendent, whether graduates ultimately find themselves working abroad or interacting with foresters, forest landowners, and forest stakeholders in settings new to them across our own country.

The School of Environment and Natural Resources at the Ohio State University runs a summer study abroad with Guangxi Eco-Engineering Technical and Vocational Institute located in Liuzhou, Guangxi, China, that includes an undergraduate research focus. The longer time spent in preparation and the research analysis focus make it a experience different from that for the Oklahoma State program. Students develop and conduct research in eucalypts (*Eucalyptus urophylla* × *Eucalyptus grandis*), Chinese fir (*Cunninghamia lanceolata*), and Masson pine (*Pinus massoniana*) forests. Students participate in the development, data collection and analysis, and written explanation of the project results. During the spring semester, before departure, students learn about the country, the region, and the forests they are going to work in and develop plans to conduct their research. During the summer semester they go to the forests in China and collect data; the fall semester, back at Ohio State, is spent analyzing data and writing. In

broad terms, the China program promotes cross-cultural understanding through daily interactions between Ohio State students and Chinese students and faculty in fieldwork and planned evening and weekend activities. Personal connections are established that broaden each student's worldview and prepare him or her for a global future. Research abroad in forestry allows students to interact with another culture and educational structure and promotes analytical and critical thinking in a foreign setting. Within a different cultural and social environment, this program exposes students to new forest ecosystems and different management techniques and practices. A more inclusive worldview of forestry is presented to students in the field, expanded from the local and regional scale typically presented to them. Such expansion provides them with the knowledge and social skills now necessary for their profession in a global society. The development of greater self-confidence and leadership traits is among the many benefits of this program; both are necessary for leaders in the forestry profession of the future.

Both programs develop traits in students that will serve them well as individuals in several ways. First, from an applied perspective, students expand their horizons and thinking skills within the field of forestry. Most forestry programs have a strong regional emphasis, with field classes and laboratories that focus on forest types of nearby ecosystems. The broader theories and methods, whether in biometrics, ecology, or economics, are applied to the forest types that are common in the region. Study abroad in a different ecotype or culture requires students to think about how such broad principles will be used in a different setting. Management of smallholder woodlots in Central America that are less than a hectare in size and short-rotation eucalyptus plantations will pose different questions and challenges for students. Participants in study abroad programs must take the basic knowledge they have learned in their home institution and apply it in a different setting, just as they will do throughout their forestry careers. Programs of this nature develop students who have a broader view of forestry. This experiential learning in a different environment expands the technical abilities and creative reasoning of students in the programs. In short, they will bring additional and important skills, par-

ticularly in cultural understanding, to their future employers.

Second, since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been the leading global political and economic power, but, arguably, that position is changing. An informed citizenry must understand how we are viewed and the aspirations of other nations and their citizens. Students who learn about forestry and culture in one country, whether it is Honduras, Ecuador, or China, will be ready to ask the right questions when they encounter the next unfamiliar forest, culture, or problem. They will have a framework to understand and consider answers to those questions. These students will have the skills needed to become productive employees and Jefferson's informed citizens. Study

abroad promotes the educated citizenry necessary for a democratic nation in a global setting.

Third, American society continues to be linked more closely with the rest of the world; trade, communication, and environmental concerns cross national boundaries. Forestry students will not be immune from these concerns as our profession evolves. Only 4% of US undergraduates participate in a study abroad program; yet, as the world continues to become more globalized and connected, surely, more forestry students would benefit from this experience. American companies and those of other countries continue to invest in international markets. In the near and distant future, professionals will interact more and more with their coun-

terparts in other nations and cultures. A person's culture reflects deep perceptions, beliefs, and values that influence his or her way of life and the way that a person views the world. Students who experience cultural differences personally can come to truly understand the local and world views of other cultures and therefore contribute more to a global society through their interactions. These experiences give students the life skills necessary to work and interact in this global society, which will become a necessary qualification for leaders in forestry and society as a whole in the future. The forester-citizen is part of the historical legacy of education in the United States and study abroad is one important way to develop this person in an evolving world.