

Why Extension Abroad Matters at Home

A Fact Sheet for Extension Specialists and Leaders¹



For U.S. universities and colleges to remain competitive and innovative forces for the greater good

in a rapidly changing world, Cooperative Extension Systems (CES) must continue to globalize to serve new and more diverse audiences, provide enriching opportunities that produce global citizens, and strengthen long-term institutional capacity.

“... BUT WHAT ABOUT OUR COMMUNITIES AT HOME?”

Extension educators and staff are agents of learning, growth, and change. Extension’s core values are founded on principles of service, leadership, self-knowledge, and open-mindedness. Our commitment to building better communities is not limited to our respective counties, states, or even country. Rather, the ability to embrace our position within a global society and build meaningful partnerships with people and institutions abroad enables us to fulfill our collective mission in today’s world.

WHY IT MATTERS

1. KEEPS US COMPETITIVE

Almost all food systems around the world are connected. U.S. research and extension efforts abroad contribute to the global fight against hunger, help build new adaptive food systems for a changing climate and create opportunities to exchange knowledge and scientific ideas – all while gaining pivotal lessons and experiences to apply at home. The reality of a global world means extension work inherently has ripple effects on farmers and communities abroad. By being more intentional about those efforts and their impacts, we can contribute to global food security while staying creative and responsive to change at home.

For Extension leadership teams, the task of globalizing program efforts is a strategic priority. Almost all land-grant universities have faculty, extension specialists, and administrators conducting research and extension programming and teaching students abroad. The cumulative force of these efforts communicates to the rest of campus, the larger community, and beyond, that land grant universities are global players committed to translating expertise and experience in research, extension, and teaching anywhere in the world, on topics related to food security, rural development, urban farming, nutrition, youth leadership, and more. Furthermore, the investment in building a global presence signals a commitment to closing the gap separating us from the less advantaged.

These initiatives elevate institutional profiles, making land grant universities more attractive to prospective students, as well as to

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faculty and extension hires. University graduates enter a world where employers are increasingly seeking global competence and knowledge (Heinert & Roberts 2016). Global extension efforts can be linked to study abroad programs and virtual global classrooms, and provide U.S. students with professional, exciting global opportunities in a field they might not have previously considered. For land grant universities to remain competitive in higher education, establishing a strong global presence is essential.

2. INVESTS IN OUR TEAMS AND THE COMMUNITIES THEY SERVE

Global projects and initiatives provide meaningful professional development opportunities for our extension specialists and faculty, despite their level of international experience. International experiences reinforce and expand skills honed at home, pushing extension educators into challenging new growth and learning zones, increasing their effectiveness in interdisciplinary environments (Vincenti, 2001; Stevens et al. 2014).

Extension educators have a wide variety of skills and knowledge that can be applied and shared globally. International experiences can have immense value and impact individually, as well as on the larger extension programs and the communities they serve. By lending expertise to a global project, both virtually and in-person, extension educators advance the body of research in their field and get the chance to collaborate with new and diverse colleagues in the United States and abroad.

The impact of travel, even if infrequent or brief, is difficult to overstate. During a mission abroad, extension staff, faculty and students can reimagine and refine their cross-cultural competencies and consider new and innovative ways of communicating information and collaborating with different stakeholders. Through travel abroad extension educators are called to be creative and adaptive and to translate skill sets in this new context, all while forming new partnerships and making a difference

in some of the world's most vulnerable communities—a highly energizing experience. New perspectives and skills are brought home and integrated into extension units, making those who travel internationally better equipped to work across diverse populations within their own community, and share knowledge gained with the people they serve.

3. STRENGTHENS INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY-BUILDING

Working abroad requires sophisticated systems for managing finances and logistics. Whether that means encouraging extension educators to participate in a two-week Farmer-to-Farmer volunteer experience, or putting together a team to land a large-scale funded project, Cooperative Extension needs bold leadership and well-integrated infrastructure to support these endeavors.

To manage a multi-million-dollar U.S. Agency for International Development project or U.S. Department of Agriculture funded cooperative agreement with partners abroad, extension units and their administrative teams must possess high-quality proposal writing skills, strong fiscal controls (e.g., ability to pass an audit), dependable and supportive administrative systems (e.g., Offices of Research Administration), evaluation specialists, international travel coordinators, and more. Once these skill sets are developed, extension programs vastly increase their ability to go for even bigger grants and funding opportunities in the future, here and abroad. By expanding our network of partners around the world and forging new collaborative relationships – in both the public and private sectors – extension can strengthen long-term institutional capacity.

THE BIG PICTURE

The goal of land grant institutions is to create transformational learning opportunities for students *and* employees to become global citizens, capable of addressing the great challenges facing the world today. Only from a collaborative global mindset will we succeed in mitigating the effects of climate change and producing new adaptive food systems, win the fight for racial and economic justice, achieve true gender equality, and protect our natural resources for future generations. From a practical, policy perspective, the U.S. benefits of international collaboration and development intersect across economic, political, environmental, health, and social sectors. Engagement abroad means increased trade and opportunities for private sector investment, exchange of scientific ideas, improved food safety and quality, and cross-cultural awareness, leading to increased tolerance and cooperation between nations (Radomski, 2002). And most importantly, extension educators are working to build a better world for future generations of producers and consumers.

Photo credit: Taryn Devereux

Right: UMD Extension specialists do a field visit with students at the Liberia International Christian College (LICC) in Ganta, Liberia, to discuss IPM and soil management (2019).



Above: For the UMD Afghanistan Agricultural Extension Project, women beneficiaries benefited from a number of demonstration sites around the country, learning about horticulture and poultry management using low-cost inputs. Here, the program director speaks with an educator about a cold frame created using recycled materials and water bottles (2015).



Above: A beneficiary of the UMD Women in Agriculture Project shows off her hen house. Through the project, women received training and five hens in exchange for setting up a hen house and a Farmer Field School on her property for other women in her community to come learn about poultry management (2018).

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