

Developing a Multidisciplinary International Training Program for Undergraduate Students

Michelle L. Cathorall
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

Saidah Mbooge Najjuma
Ndejje University

An international partnership was initiated focused on developing a multidisciplinary international internship for US undergraduate students, create a multidisciplinary field experience for Ugandan students, and foster research collaborations. Outcomes include increased perceived cultural competence, comfort working with individuals from diverse background, co-authored manuscripts and presentations and a memorandum of understanding for exchanges, and research collaborations. Keys to the success of the program were having a shared vision, responsibility, and commitment to the program, and communication about goals, expectations, and expected benefits. The next program builds on the lessons learned to improve the experience for students and faculty for future programs.

INTRODUCTION

The world is more interconnected than it has ever been, changing the demands on graduates as they enter the work force. To successfully address global health issues, we need to prepare students with a variety of skills and knowledge, including cultural awareness, communication skills and the ability to work with people from diverse cultural backgrounds and as part of interprofessional teams (McElmurry, Misner, & Bush, 2003; Baytor & Cabrera, 2014). While university degree programs prepare students with the knowledge and technical skills necessary to enter the workforce, they often do not provide adequate, if any, training in the requisite “soft skills” to be successful (Brooks, 2008; Duncan, Birdsong, Fuhrman, & Borron, 2017). Employers indicate that effective oral and written communication and being able think critically in real world settings is lacking in recent graduates (Klebnikov, 2015; Workforce Solutions Group, 2019). Many soft skills, such as communication, decision making, problem solving, conflict resolution, time management and working with teams are skills not adequately addressed in degree programs, perhaps because they are more challenging to teach and evaluate in the classroom setting. Instead, degree programs rely on students developing them through prior relationships, personal and professional, throughout their lives (Murti, 2014).

Additionally, working in a global environment requires an interdisciplinary perspective, which allows students to use the added knowledge of other disciplines to understand the context of health issues and identify solutions (McElmurry, Misner, & Bush, 2003). Public health issues are complex, requiring participation from multiple stakeholders to address them. Well planned experiential learning opportunities, such as structured internships, can enhance discipline specific knowledge and technical

skills as well as positively influence soft skills (Duncan, Birdsong, Fuhrman, & Borron, 2017). Placing that structured experiential learning opportunity in an international setting and having public health students with students in other disciplines may foster the cultural competence that students in health-related fields require to practice their professions in an increasingly diverse society. This may further enhance decision making, critical thinking as well as communication and conflict resolution skills.

The impetus for developing this experiential learning opportunity was rooted in the need to offer students more opportunities to work with individuals from diverse backgrounds and to enhance students' soft skills so that they are better prepared to meet the challenges of working with diverse communities, changing health/communication needs, and globalization (Fried, Begg, Bayer, & Galea, 2014). In addition, international internship programs have been shown to help students develop a more open view of the world, and enhance personal growth and professional skills such as leadership and teamwork, all of which are important skills for today's graduates (Bourke-Taylor & Hudson, 2005; Ergon-Polak & Hudson 2010; Baytor & Cabrera, 2014; Duncan, Birdsong, Fuhrman, & Borron, 2017).

The learning outcomes of global health learning experiences provide these benefits for students, but the goal of global health experiential learning opportunities should go beyond just preparing the US students, it should also help build capacity in the host country and at the host institution and be sustainable. In order for global health training programs to be sustainable they must be built on mutually agreed upon goals and provide mutual benefits (Barker, Kinsella, & Bosser, 2010; Suarez-Balcazar, Hammel, Mayo, Inwald, & Sen, 2013). Faculty at each university share similar and unique roles and ways of conducting research. The similarities include the traditional faculty roles of teaching, research, and service. However, one difference between universities in the US and especially in low-income countries, is the preparation and research capacity of faculty. This has led to scenarios where "experts" and students from high-income countries perpetuate colonial era practices of leading research efforts with little to no value placed on the expertise of the partners in low-middle income countries (Pai, 2019). One way to address this issue is to develop partnerships that build capacity and enhance the research efforts of partners in host countries.

The purpose of this manuscript is to discuss the development of an international collaboration between two academic institutions, that benefits students and faculty from the US and the host institution. The collaboration is based on the model developed by Suarez-Balcazar and colleagues (2013) that idea that global collaborations should be mutually beneficial and the premise that the program should help reduce global volunteerism. The three phases of the collaborative model will be discussed: planning and preparation, developing and sustaining the partnership and outcomes and benefits (Suarez-Balcazar, Hammel, Mayo, Inwald, & Sen, 2013). Specific areas of exchange, shared learning, lessons learned, and plans for improvement will be highlighted. The partnership is based on our experience with a private university in Uganda, Africa.

METHODS

Developing the Partnership Between a Ugandan University and a U.S. Based Public Health Undergraduate Program

The partnership between the public health program and Ndejje University (NDU) began in 2015 when the corresponding author on this paper contacted the Dean of Social Sciences at NDU to discuss the potential for collaboration. The idea was based on developing a research-training program where students would work with NDU faculty on their community based or field research. In discussions with the Dean it was clear that there was an opportunity for the public health students to conduct field work with the NDU students during the 5-week summer session. In January of 2018, after several years of email correspondence, the first author and a colleague visited NDU. Both were encouraged by the opportunities available to students for practical and research training collaborations. During the visit they met with faculty and administrators to discuss the educational and research placements for the summer and long-term plans for the partnership. While NDU does not have a public health program they have undergraduate social work and community development programs that place students in communities to

complete field work at the end of their first year. Through discussions with the faculty, staff and administration of NDU areas of common training among the social work, community development and public health students were identified. Building on the field work that the NDU students were already participating in, the summer program was developed so that students would work on interprofessional teams utilizing the needs assessment, program planning and implementation skills learned in their respective programs to address a single issue identified by a given community. During the visit, the authors agreed that the long-term plan was to develop a formal memorandum of understanding between the universities that would include student and faculty education and research exchanges.

The program consisted of a 5-week immersive placement at NDU over the summer. The US students lived on campus in the dorms and ate at the dining hall with the Ugandan students. Students were given the option of rooming with a US or Ugandan student. The field teams consisted of 7 or 8 Uganda students and two US students. Ugandan students were pursuing degrees in social work or community development and were completing their field work at the end of their first year. A Ugandan faculty member worked with each team to supervise and provide guidance. Each team was assigned to work with a specific community located within walking distance of NDU. Each community had a chairperson and approximately 200 homes. The chairperson met with the teams and provided introductions to the community gatekeepers. Two US faculty members were also in the host country to work with faculty at NDU and oversee the field work of the US students.

Planning for the Experience

The next step was to prepare for the international experience, which included selecting students, gaining knowledge of the host country the international institution is located in, and preparing for the placement experience. The summer program was made available to undergraduate public health seniors who were completing their internships and advanced juniors who wanted service-learning experience. International or cultural experience was not required to be eligible for this program, just a willingness to complete a 5-week placement at NDU during the summer.

Student Selection

Students applied for the program through the university study abroad website. The application included academic information, such as major and GPA, a personal statement about why they wanted to participate, and a letter of recommendation from a faculty member. The faculty program leader reviewed all completed applications. Selection criteria were based on their personal statement and letters of recommendation. Applicants that the program leader did not personally know were asked to participate in an in-person interview to assess the applicants' potential for success and their ability to adapt and adjust in a culturally different environment. Eight undergraduate public health students were selected to participate in the first program; six seniors completing an international internship and two juniors enrolled in a service-learning course during May/June 2018. The students completing the service-learning course participated in the same work as the internship students with guidance from the senior students.

Gaining Knowledge of the Host Country and Preparing for the Placement Experience

All US students accepted into the program were required to participate in six pre-trip preparatory sessions. The pre-trip meetings were designed to emphasize the importance of having an understanding of the host country and how students' culture and discipline specific training impacts interactions and working on an interprofessional team. Each two-hour session focused on a different aspect of preparing for the trip and had a question and answer session. The initial session was an overview of the program logistics such as schedule, vaccinations, passport and visa requirements, and a slide show to provide an overview of what they could expect to eat at the dining hall, the dorm room and campus facilities. Three sessions focused on cultural awareness, understanding the elements of culture, an initial assessment of cultural competence, and a simulation designed to help students identify areas that culture may play a role in our interactions with our Ugandan colleagues. Students tend to overestimate their cultural awareness and understanding. This help true for the students in this program. Results of the initial assessment

indicated that all the students felt competent or very competent in all areas of cultural competence pre-trip. The remaining sessions were designed to provide a context for the work that the students would complete during the placement, including providing an overview of the historical, political, social, and cultural aspects of Uganda that may have an impact on the health. During these pre-trip sessions the program leader and the students discussed the logistics of the travel and living arrangements at the host institution.

Upon arrival at NDU the US students settled into their dorm rooms and familiarized themselves with the campus before the NDU students arrived on campus. During the first week all students participated in an orientation to the fieldwork experience, met their NDU faculty field supervisor and their Ugandan student team members. Teams were assigned their communities and immediately went to meet with the chairperson. Over the next couple days, the chairperson gave students a community tour and introduced them to key stakeholders before they started conducting the needs assessment in the communities.

DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING THE PARTNERSHIP

Having a shared vision, responsibility, and commitment to the program are key factors for developing a successful partnership (Suarez-Balcazar, et al., 2013). While some of these factors were identified and addressed during the pre-trip planning phase, there were other aspects that were not identified until we were in Uganda working side by side with our Ugandan colleagues. The discussion below describes the successes and challenges in establishing the partnership.

Communication

Establishing communication early in the partnership was essential to developing goals, expectations, and clarifying expected benefits for both of the institutions, faculty and students. Several factors impacted communication with the faculty, students and community members. Basic electrical service, Internet connectivity, access to technology, cultural practices related to communication patterns, and languages spoken presented challenges for students and faculty working together. Electricity and Internet connectivity can present challenges in low-middle income countries, and that was the case in Uganda at times. However, email communication with the faculty was the preferred method of communication, which posed challenges when internet connectivity was weak or not available. While we were in country, we also used free messaging apps for the cell phones. Texting and Whatsapp were helpful for the students to stay connected with their teammates.

English is the official language of Uganda that is taught in schools and used in courts, however, there are more than nine languages spoken in the communities surrounding NDU and some rural community members do not speak English. This would have been an issue for the students working in communities, since most of them do not speak Lugandan, which is one of the most common languages for the region or any of the others. Having large student teams, two US and up to 8 Ugandan students, helped to ensure that there was someone on each team that spoke the language of the community member, this was facilitated by the host faculty prior to our arrival. Although English is the official language of Uganda, word and phrases often have different meanings than they do in western cultures. This presented challenges during all phases of the program. Having an understanding of this in advance was critical to helping reduce students' acceptance and understanding of the differences.

Throughout the planning process communication was critical to establishing the goals and expectations of the partnership. Several iterations of the goals and expectations were presented and revised based on feedback from faculty and university administrators from both institutions. One area that was not clearly defined were the expected benefits for the host institution. Although we had outlined the long- and short-term goals of the partnership, the specific benefits for the students, faculty and NDU were not explicitly defined. This was a shortfall of the planning process. Specific benefits as a result of each visit will be agreed upon in advance of future trips.

Recognizing Cultural and Respecting Differences

Before departing for Uganda we worked to ensure that the students recognized some of the cultural differences that they would encounter, emphasizing respect for differences. Two of the cultural differences discussed were greetings and the concept of time. While neither of these topics seemed to be an issue during the pre-trip sessions, in practice when we arrived in country, students struggled with both of them. In Uganda the most common greeting is the handshake, and it is customary to shake everyone's hand when you meet them. The difference is how long the handshake lasts. People in the United States are most accustomed to a quick handshake. The Ugandan handshake is longer and may include a series of grips. Students who were uncomfortable with this practice felt that they person was holding their hand instead of shaking it. Although we had discussed what the cultural practice was during the pre-trip meetings, we did not explicitly discuss the cultural relevance or meaning of handshakes which may have contributed the lack of understanding some of the visiting students felt. This will be explicitly discussed during future pre-trip meetings.

Time was one of the biggest cultural differences that the visiting students struggled with while working with their field work teams. The teams would plan to meet at 8:00 am, so the visiting students would arrive at the designated meeting spot by 8:00 am while they Ugandan students would start to arrive at 8:45 and some not until 9:30 am. For the visiting students this was frustrating because in American culture we are conditioned that time is money and appointments must start at the scheduled time, whereas in Uganda time is more fluid and scheduled events typically do not start at the scheduled time. Time as a cultural concept will be more deeply explored and discussed during pre-trip meetings to help increase students' preparedness.

In the past we only required the US students to participate in pre-trip meetings to discuss cultural differences. Two changes that will be implemented based on our experience are the we will require US students participate in a culture course as part of the immersion experience. In addition to the pre-trip meetings the course will provide a more in-depth exploration of the cultural differences that students are experience while in country. The Ugandan students on teams with US students will be invited to participate in some of the initial sessions where cultural differences are being discussed in an effort to enhance student learning for all students involved in the program. This is important because like many of the visiting students this is their first time working on a team with someone from a different cultural background.

Establishing Shared Learning Experiences

For many of the public health and the NDU students this is the first time they were working with a multidisciplinary team, so recognizing the strengths and learning opportunities of the team members was critical for creating a reciprocal learning environment (Suarez-Balcazar, Hammel, Mayo, Inwald, & Sen, 2013). Students discussed theories of public health, social work and community development throughout the fieldwork experience, as they worked together to help communities address issues. For many of the NDU students, this was the first time in the field, while the public health students had completed at least one fieldwork experience prior to this one, creating an opportunity for the more experienced students to help guide the NDU students and answer general questions they had about working with communities. The NDU students helped explain cultural differences that the US students were unclear about.

One focus of the fieldwork for the students was to assist community members to address the needs that were identified by the community members. Many of the identified needs were related to poverty, which provided another shared learning opportunity for students. As part of their respective programs students each learn how to address issues from a unique perspective. What they lack training on is how to work together to address the same health issue from different disciplinary perspectives. This is an area that the pre-trip meetings did not discuss, thus the visiting students were ill equipped to handle this when it arose with their teammates. Additionally, the NDU students were not training to work with an interprofessional team either. Pre-trip meetings will explicitly address this and provide training in how to work with team members from outside your field. Once in country, visiting faculty will meet with the interdisciplinary teams to discuss this issue so that all students are benefiting from the experience.

During the first program, the NDU faculty requested that the visiting faculty give a public lecture to the campus community. Given that public health was not a degree program offered by the host university, the lecture provided background knowledge of the field and areas of research. Going forward the visiting faculty will work with doctorally trained NDU faculty to develop a series of research trainings that they will co-present to the faculty of NDU. Co-developing and presenting research training for bachelors and masters level faculty can help increase research capacity at NDU, enhance research collaboration among NDU and visiting faculty and provide faculty mentors to support student research.

RESULTS

Evaluating the Program

Outcomes of the program included a formal partnership agreement, student learning, students' personal growth and increased cultural awareness, and faculty connections. One of the main outcomes from this first experience was to work with the faculty and administration to develop a memorandum of understanding. Through a series of meetings between the co-authors the preliminary draft was created. Final points were discussed and agreed upon at a meeting with the NDU administration. The final version has been negotiated with the administration at the US institution, with plans for an in person signing in Uganda in summer 2020. The agreement outlines the commitment and expectations of each institution, including how to ensure that the opportunity for student exchange is available to NDU students to study at the US institution.

The visiting faculty members continued to build on the relationships they started via email over the previous years. Connections among the faculty included shared research interests, co-authoring manuscripts, and co-developing grant proposals. To date one co-authored conference presentation has been presented, a NIH grant proposal submitted, and three co-authored manuscripts are in process. Formal evaluation of the internship experience and the associated student learning, personal, and cultural outcomes will be described in a separate article.

DISCUSSION

Working with an international academic institution to create a multidisciplinary international collaborative partnership with the goals of mutual benefits and building capacity has benefits for students through increased learning and for faculty through knowledge generation, dissemination, and increased capacity, that require planning and inclusion of all parties involved. The short-term outcomes of the experience for students include increased perceived cultural competence, comfort working with individuals from diverse background, and independence. Short-term outcomes for faculty include co-authored manuscripts and presentations. The long-term impacts of the experience include a memorandum of understanding for student and faculty exchanges, increased research training and capacity, and teaching and research collaborations.

Lessons were learned by both institutions, from logistics, to creating informal networking opportunities for students and faculty to facilitate working as a team and managing expectations. This was the first time NDU had hosted students in the campus dorms. As such, the hospitality of the university created some unintended consequences. For example, breakfast was provided for the US students. While breakfast is customary for US students, it is not usually served at the dining hall for NDU students. Unfortunately, this exacerbated the sense of privilege for the US students, garnering negative comments from NDU students. As the NDU and visiting faculty learned of the situation it was discussed and quickly corrected. As discussed above, pre-trip meetings and training sessions are important for visiting students, but they are just as important for the students in the host country that are working with the visiting students. Future programs will include workshops and trainings for visiting and host students to participate together.

Although there were some challenges during the first program there are many positive aspects of the partnership that resulted. Keys to the success of the program were having a shared vision, responsibility,

and commitment to the program, and communication about goals, expectations, and expected benefits. From the initial email communications, the Dean of Social Sciences at NDU and the corresponding author shared a vision for what the partnership would entail and a commitment to making it successful. Working with the faculty and administration at each institution and to identify who was responsible for the many aspects of the partnership was critical for accountability. The iterative process of defining the shared goals of the partnership helped both institutions manage expectations. The next program builds on the lessons learned the initial program to improve the experience for students, faculty and the sustainability of the partnership.

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