

Immersion in International Experiential Learning: The International Business Immersion Program

Hamish Gow, *Michigan State University*

Meredith Blumthal, *University of Illinois*

INTERNATIONAL FOOD & AGRIBUSINESS MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION
WORLD FORUM & SYMPOSIUM
Budapest, Hungary
June 20-23, 2009

Introduction

In today's global food and agribusiness sector the cooperation between industry and academia at the university levels allows agribusiness students a unique opportunity to become better educated and experienced for issues they will be facing in agribusiness sector. Not all students will become leaders, but many have potential that often goes undeveloped. As the agriculture sector faces a declining workforce population, the potential new leaders are recent university graduates, who often lack the right skill set to be successful in an ever-changing global industry. However, one such program at the University of Illinois, The International Business Immersion Program (IBIP) is harnessing the potential of future leaders and providing them with unique international experiences that allow them to become the local solutions in the US to the global issues facing the food and agriculture sector in the coming years. This paper will address why such programs are needed, how they are implemented and what the outcome has been since the program's inception in 2002.

Industry Needs/Justification

Increasingly firms in the agriculture and food industry are affected by and/or operate in a global marketplace; therefore their leaders must possess a dynamic set of global experiences, skills and competencies that provide them with the global vision and entrepreneurial leadership skills necessary to effectively lead agricultural organizations through the strategic, operational, and political challenges that they will confront in the future. By removing students from the classroom and immersing them in the real world, this unique program of industry lead, research-based experiential learning activities provides participants with an opportunity to bridge the separate discipline silos and jointly apply their knowledge in an interdisciplinary manner to solving the complex issues and challenges that agribusiness managers currently face operating in

today's global business environment. The goal of this program is to begin developing the next generation of globally literate entrepreneurial leaders who "hit the real world running" with a "can do" attitude; leading the Illinois and US agriculture sectors into the future.

This global entrepreneurial leadership gap is partly a historical consequence of the protective, regional commodity roots that have dominated our agriculture system for the past hundred years or so. Within this system, in the past, leaders have been less concerned about competitive issues beyond their local competitors who operate with the same immediate business environment and produce similar products. Globalization however has swiftly changed the competitive landscape within which food and agricultural firms now operate: increased access to global capital markets, reduced barriers to trade and investment, and increased penetration and diffusion of foreign capital and technology has resulted in dramatic production and consumption shifts worldwide. New entrants can now swiftly, decisively, and unexpectedly overwhelm traditionally, "protected" markets with either lower cost substitutes and/or more technologically advanced alternatives. This is occurring at an ever increasing rate. These substitutes and alternatives are increasingly being produced in Asia and in Latin America with Western capital and technology, traditionally the competitive advantages of the US and European firms. Consequently, senior executives across the agri-food industry have repeatedly articulated and stressed the need to be able to recruit students out of innovative global leadership development programs designed to develop the "new" breed of global entrepreneurial leaders.

Challenge: Global Relevance and Experiential content

Since the 1980s, the concept of experiential learning has spread throughout academic settings from small elementary schools to major U.S. colleges and universities. Where traditional education places all its emphasis on the instructor, providing information at the time of evaluation, experiential learning is an active learning process of direct experiences and focused expression of the knowledge gained. In other words, experiential learning takes students beyond the classroom to gain real-world application of the learning in a real setting.

The International Business Immersion Program meets an industry need by providing a unique experiential learning opportunity, immersing participants in the critical cross-cultural, cross-

functional, and cross-regional issues that span international food marketing channels. Contextually grounded in the real world, participants examine, analyze, and evaluate the complex issues and challenges that international agribusiness leaders and managers face along the entire international food marketing channel from raw materials origination in an Illinois farmer's field to foreign food consumption.

The experiential nature of the IBIP program continues to challenge the frames of reference of participants by exposing them to cultural experiences abroad, and facilitating visits to firms abroad providing them with the opportunities to experience first-hand the challenges that global industries face. The relevant issues facing the region of focus are organized in the classroom thematically. For example, in Europe, the challenges of the changing consumer are addressed under the theme "Firm, Channel, and Industry Dynamics within the European Agri-Food Sector" and in Brazil, the issues of market liberalization were addressed, "Responses to Market Liberalization and Reform in Brazil: The Conflicts between Big Business, Poverty, and the Environment."

Transformational Learning: Completing the learning circle

The basis of all educational institutions is the teaching mission. It is the responsibility of educators to not only transfer knowledge to students, but also to engage them to think critically, develop decision-making skills, improve communications skills, and to acquire and refine leadership skills. According to Mezirow, "We do not make transformative changes in the way we learn as long as what we learn fits comfortably in our existing frames of reference." (1997). The IBIP program implements active learning experiences, case studies, problem solving and capstone experiences that challenge students' frames of reference. Upon the beginning of the following semester, students are brought back to the classroom to "close the learning circle" by reflecting and rewriting on their experiences. "Writing" is not always defined in traditional terms, as participants must use multiple forms of media, writing and video in particular, to provide critical reflections of assumptions and validating contested beliefs through discussions and taking action on one's reflective insight (Mezirow, 1997).

The leaders of today's global agribusiness need skill critical skill sets that far exceed the traditional managerial, functional, and regional skills possessed by these leaders and executives; instead the new global business environment requires that these leaders gain an integrated

grounding in the critical cross-functional, cross-cultural, and cross-regional issues and skills that span the global food system to complement and enhance their traditional way of thinking.

Industry/Academia Partnership: How does it work?

The International Business Immersion Program is a cooperative effort between Industry and Academia to prepare the future global leaders in the food and agribusiness sector. The support by multinational corporations provides much needed funding to develop and implement this type of programs. Industry is willing to contribute because they value the experiences students' gain, not just in learning about globally relevant issues, but the global exposure that students have to their firms and their supply chains. Participants see first-hand the vast depth of the program's corporate partners, who are often household names in agriculture. This exposure allows students to gain a broader understanding of the businesses that the IBIP corporate partners are involved in, and what their long-run opportunities can be within such firms. This type of experience is unique and invaluable in today's agribusiness sector, which is facing decline numbers of new graduates.

Additionally, the interdisciplinary nature of the IBIP program provides firms an opportunity to interact with a diverse group of student backgrounds, essentially presented to them on a silver platter. The end goal of both parties is an employment opportunity; the student at the end of their academic career and the firm, to employ an IBIP student, who is more likely to stay with the firm longer than the rest and has had invaluable experiences that allow them to have a better understanding of the food and agriculture sector. Furthermore, students with more tradition business backgrounds often discover a world of employment opportunities within the agriculture sector that were not obvious to them before their participation in the IBIP program.

Academic Freedoms?

This nature of the industry-corporate relationship does not restrict academic freedoms for faculty and students because the relationship benefits both parties: For the students and faculty, the ease at which access is gained to top level executives is tremendous. Additionally, corporate partners are engaged and involved in the planning process, helping the faculty and staff in the search and

scanning process, reducing wasted time and efforts in identifying appropriate site visits and executives that meet the program goals. Additionally, working with US multinational agribusiness firms often means there are several different opportunities to interact with corporate partners abroad, from a variety of locations and division, again allowing students to experience the depth of involvement of these firms globally. For example, in Europe ADM has trading facilities in Rolle, Switzerland, Cocoa processing facilities in Koog, the Netherlands as well as operates and owns Europoort west of Rotterdam in the Netherlands, allowing multiple sets of opportunity for interaction with the agribusiness sector and aiding in the logistical ease of developing an overseas immersion trip.

Other sectors and firms outside corporate partners are also included, especially when they provide forward and backward linkages within a supply chain sector. Often these firms are also willing to provide in-kind support. These firms are relevant and important because they illustrate the appropriate linkages within a supply chain, providing participants with holistic view of a supply chain and its actors.

Impact/Results (People & Quotes)

Throughout the in-class learning process and experiential learning in out of class situations abroad in Europe, the opportunity to interact with firms and managers allows students to improve their conversation and interview skills putting them more at ease when speaking with executives. Those skills, and the business experiences will eventually be used in interviews and social and business situations and into employment. The results are illustrated below.

“IBIP has proved to be an untraditional class that offers students a chance to gain a new perspective on the world. Outside the US, people and businesses operate differently to adapt to their environment. After being to both Europe and Brazil, I have seen the true meaning of this. After going on the trips, I have changed my perspective on how I view things, especially in a business sense. Because of the trips I feel that I was given a step-up from other students in getting a job and understanding my job once I start working.” D. Ahearn, 2006

“The IBIP to Europe and Brazil helped me break out of my narrow Illinois perspective about agriculture. Before I participated in the IBIP, I thought that the United States dominated all facets of agriculture. One week after I returned from Europe, I

started my career as a Client Service Specialist with ADM. As I begin my career, I realize that I have more professional tools than the other trainees.” –M. Cox, 2006

“Personally and academically, the International Business Immersion Program pushed me outside of my comfort zones. I met new people and learned to work with different personalities, experienced new cultures, and produced some of my best work during this class. The growth from these experiences is unparalleled during my college experience and I am so glad to have had this opportunity.” M. Janci, 2007

“The IBIP program really showed me how science and business in the real world connect. It made me realize that in the real world, you have to be able to interact with people from all fields to have a successful company and to respect their opinions and try to understand what they are talking about. I do not think the university does a good job of integrating different fields as it is once you get out of college. Here at U of I, there is a pretty distinct line between business majors and science majors. Rarely is there any interaction between the two groups, but the IBIP program helped bridge that gap for me.” –A. Thornton, 2007

“Not only was I culturally and emotionally changed for a lifetime – I learned more about business and professionalism from the International Business Immersion Program than I have in an entire college career. Mainly because I am a firm believer that experiential learning is really the most effective way to gain knowledge and ultimately be successful.” –J.Becker, 2008

“The experiences on our trip with companies, professors, and locals taught me an un-measurable amount about myself, the working world, and of course the global agricultural industry.” M.Biegel, 2008

The IBIP program not only challenges students, but it helps set them above their peers and provides them with experiences that help them become successful in the workplace.

“I now have a full time job as an environmental scientist for ENSR- an environmental/engineering consulting firm. Even though I'm not in a 'business' profession, my interviewers were very interested in learning about IBIP and why an environmental scientist would be interested in such a program. When I explained the IBIP program to them and how I understand that ENSR is indeed a business (not just out to save the world as many environmentalists are), they were thoroughly impressed, and I was told that this definitely helped get me the job! Interviewers for other jobs were also very interested and impressed with the program. So thank you! It was a very worthwhile program and definitely a resume booster!” A. Thornton, Europe 2007

The International Business Immersion Program meets an industry need by providing a unique experiential learning opportunity. The program is 3 inseparable parts, combining a one-semester course with an intensive two-week themed industry led and research based immersion experience to Europe, Asia, Oceania or Latin America, followed by a 6-8 week project development and presentation in the following semester, IBIP participants gain the requisite and immediate applicable skills and knowledge necessary to “hit the real world running.”

References

Mezirow, Jack 1997. *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*. Issue 74, pp. 5-13