Teaching across Cultures

To help meet the demand for graduates with international skills, Purdue University’s Department of Forestry and Natural Resources has teamed with the Sveriges Lantbruks Universitet (Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences) to offer a jointly taught four-week summer course that brings together Swedish and American faculty and students. Alternately taught in the United States and Sweden, the course includes lectures on international resource issues, an extended field tour, team projects, leadership training, and communications practice.

By Andrew R. Gillespie, William K. Rawlins, Walter L. Mills Jr., Pol R. Coppin, Mats Olsson, Kaj Rosén, Clas Fries, Per-Ove Bäckström, Eric Agestam, and Tord Magnusson

Imagine enjoying the mountain view through your living room window when, across your yard, you see backpackers enter your property and set up a tent. As you approach the campers, they’re picking your blueberries for their evening meal. Incredulous, you evict them. But soon they return with police officers, who fine you for breaking the law. You’re also informed that you can’t erect a fence to keep such intruders off your land, except to enclose the lawn adjacent to your house.

Sound like a property rights nightmare? Not in Sweden, as students who participate in Purdue University’s summer program with Sveriges Lantbruks Universitet (Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, SLU) find out. The privilege of crossing and using other people’s land, with the proviso that one not cause damage, is known as the right of common access and is just one of many cultural and natural resource management differences that emerge when students and faculty from the United States and Sweden come together to learn with and teach each other.

The Convergence of Needs

In recent years, Purdue has sought to internationalize its research and teaching programs. The Forestry and Natural Resources Department’s four-week summer course with Sveriges Lantbruks Universitet, a part of this effort, recognizes that US students in the natural resources receive little exposure to other cultures and their resource issues. Indeed, most US programs emphasize regional issues as they struggle to concentrate all the necessary technical knowledge and management skills into four years.

Yet many industries, agencies, and...
The Concept

To provide an international experience with direction and substance, instructors from both universities would have to help design and implement the course. This is why the joint teaching approach was developed, allowing both sets of faculty to provide perspectives (as well as country-specific examples) on a particular technique, resource, or issue. It was also natural to have students from both countries enroll in the course and to use their cultural differences as part of the teaching and learning process. For Purdue and SLU (and we suspect for most other universities as well), this combining of students and teachers represents a new model for international instruction and intercultural experience; it distinguishes this program from the semester-long study-abroad programs (including several in the natural resources) already offered at both universities, in which individual students enroll in regular classes at a foreign institution.
tution. In the Purdue-SLU model, both faculty and students travel abroad and take a course designed especially for them. Also, American students study alongside their Swedish counterparts while learning in a variety of settings, with both theoretical and hands-on experiences.

Because students and faculty from the two countries study and teach together, the course need not be overseas for participants to gain international experience. So the site alternates, one year in the United States and the next year in Sweden. The host faculty and students benefit from exchanging experiences and cultures in a natural resource setting, even though the surroundings are familiar.

The purpose of the course is exposure to a range of international natural resource issues; the topic studied becomes a vehicle to meet this goal. The topic therefore changes annually to take advantage of each faculty's expertise and location, to draw from a different pool of students, and to allow different professors to participate. Courses to date have included Forest Decline in Sweden and Germany (1995), Hardwood Ecosystem Management and Use in the Central United States (1996), and Land Use and Conflict in Northern Sweden (1997). The topic for summer 1998 will be Managing Ecosystems and Recreation in Prairie and Mountain Landscapes of the Western United States. Each faculty makes use of its resources in conducting a course, including alumni in various agencies and programs.

The faculties also wanted to create a reason for the students to collaborate and thereby receive instruction on working together in international teams. With this in mind, a communications component was added; expertise came from Purdue's Department of Communication. The communications component integrates instruction in social interaction, team building, and presentation skills in intercultural contexts with research in forestry and natural resource issues in the host culture. Students learn how to work with both sexes and with people from different cultural backgrounds and specializations; they study the sensitive and effective use of verbal and nonverbal communication for developing productive relationships, making decisions, planning work, gathering information, and solving task-oriented problems in teams. Lectures and exercises illustrate options for productive group roles, effective leadership practices, working cohesively, and managing interpersonal conflict. Instructors help students prepare for and conduct research interviews. These skills are taught with immediate application within the course, both in working as international student teams and in gathering information from local experts.

The Course

Though the course topic changes each year, the format always includes introductory lectures for one to two weeks followed by a 10-day field tour and time to prepare student reports. Standard lectures and discussion sections are supplemented by local outdoor labs. Different teaching styles are accommodated. One SLU faculty member brought several posters from a recent scientific meeting and held a poster session with follow-up discussion. The field tour is extensive: participants sometimes travel thousands of kilometers by bus or van. Tours have examined air pollution damage and ecosystem research in southern Sweden and Germany; recreation, watershed, forestry, and wildlife management by state and federal agencies and industry in the Midwest and the Appalachians; and landownership versus use by native peoples for reindeer herding, as well as other conflicting environmental uses of land in northern Sweden. The 1998 tour will focus on park and forest management and ecosystem characteristics that define human carrying capacities and impacts across the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains.

For each course two faculty members from each institution handle oversight and instruction. The host institution normally recruits additional faculty and local professionals for lectures as well as the field tour, both to broaden the cultural exposure and to allow additional perspectives. Even local citizens become involved when the topic covers small landownerers or conflicts between agencies or industries and communities.

The target for each course is 20 US students and 20 SLU students. The course is advertised in natural resource programs across the United States and is open to students from any school who have completed at least their freshman year. At SLU the course is open to any enrolled student who meets certain prerequisites, and students on exchange programs at SLU have participated. Students from Ethiopia, France, Germany, Austria, and China have enrolled as well as students from Ghana and India studying at American universities, giving additional dimensions to cross-cultural interaction.

The students' main assignment is a group report to be presented at the end of the course. Each group—its members carefully chosen by instructors to include a balanced mix of nationalities, sexes, and disciplines—selects a topic from a list developed by the course faculty. With this arrangement, students are compelled from the start to interact with people from different backgrounds and to share both technical information and cultural experience. The students learn from each other how to use computer-aided instruction and projection technologies and how to use the local library and computer resources. Cooperation enhances their success as a group and serves the goals of the course.
tour, instruction in individual and group presentation skills includes the integration of visual aids for explaining technical material. Students are taught to make clearly organized and informative presentations to various audiences. Guidelines for the group presentations specify that each student present a portion of the report, and the evaluation criteria include both mastery of technical issues and effectiveness in individual and group communication. Specific, constructive feedback is provided to each team and to the individual students.

Student evaluations—covering the cross-cultural integration, the natural resource and communications course components, the mix of classroom lectures and field labs, and the extent to which course objectives were met—help the faculty in designing the following year's program.

Benefits and Successes

Instructors from both institutions come away from the course with new ideas and methods for teaching, as well as new knowledge about the other country's natural resources and their management. From Purdue's point of view, this four-week summer course has provided US students with valuable international experience, even when the program has been at Purdue. School and university administrators and faculty across all natural resource disciplines have been supportive, providing time and energy to the course throughout the year.

SLU also believes the course has been successful. The educational cooperation with Purdue is SLU's first joint teaching program in the United States and has opened additional exchange possibilities outside the European Community for Swedish students as well as providing deeper insights into US culture in general and university organization in particular. An extra benefit for Swedish students is practice in the use of English.

The opportunity for joint teaching has also led to opportunities for joint research. Projects in boreal, temperate, and tropical ecosystems are being pursued by various faculty members. The greatest impact, however, has been on students. Although each course has scheduled events for the students, the students themselves have taken the responsibility of being ambassadors for their respective countries, organizing trips to baseball games in Chicago, going biking in northern Sweden, arranging sightseeing and shopping trips in Indianapolis and Stockholm, taking in fireworks and concerts on the Fourth of July, and explaining the finer aspects of the use of saunas. Lasting student friendships have been formed, and the technology of electronic mail allows distance communication among students as it does among faculty. We've found that this summer course, with its controlled environment and short duration, has piqued some US students' interest in undertaking semester-long exchange programs.

Though a few US students are fluent in a second language, lack of foreign language skills remains a barrier to implementing similar programs in most countries. Swedish students, on the other hand, have a high level of English proficiency. Though some may feel that using primarily English diminishes the international experience, it actually enhances the exchange, as one instructor discovered as he came upon a student research team meeting around a picnic table. The German woman, Swedish man, and two American women were trying to reconcile their three definitions of "wilderness" for their report. Since "wilderness areas" in the United States must meet certain criteria for legal or regulatory designation, something not found in Europe, the nuances of language were important.

Challenges for Faculty

International travel demands considerable resources. The cost to a US student is $2,000 to $2,500 when the program is in Sweden, half of which is airfare. A USDA higher education challenge grant was instrumental in establishing the program and offsetting students' costs. Cost is less of a barrier to the Swedish students. University education in Sweden is normally free—SLU receives a fixed amount of money per student and course credit from the ministry of agriculture—but students have to cover their own food, lodging, and textbooks. When the course is at Purdue, SLU pays the majority of costs for travel and lodging, and students contribute about US$500. To date, the students have funded their contribution with the help of Swedish forest companies, whose patronage indicates the importance industry ascribes to the program.

Efforts to reduce costs include sub-

Because of their importance to forest and rangeland production and management, the properties of soils in the boreal and temperate zones are a focus for both class lectures and fieldwork. This soil pit was dug at the SLU experimental forest outside Umeå.
Future Directions

The course must remain dynamic to meet the objectives. Feedback from student evaluations clearly indicates success in intercultural exchange and learning. Students also strongly favor more time in the field relative to classroom time. As with any course, the instructors try to balance these and other teaching constraints. Though many students have had previous exposure to the communications concepts, they appreciate their immediate and necessary application in research and presentations. Leadership reports and group dynamics show that students have grasped these concepts when compelled to view them objectively, aside from their immediate participation. Student presentations can be of high quality, and we've observed that the last groups learn from earlier presenters. It is also clear that we need to develop the critical thinking skills of our students, and course components may change to strengthen this area.

The curricula of each institution are dynamic as well, requiring evolution of the course to meet new external needs, such as changing job markets or accreditation requirements. What will we teach in the future? The desires of the faculties and the practicalities of funding and logistics will shape where, what, and how we jointly teach our course.

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