

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Polish-American Extension Project (PAEP) can be considered a success. It was viewed by both participants and near associates as having a sustaining impact on the people involved and secondarily to many colleagues, family members and community residents who became involved through contact with the original participants. However, the impacts of the project on the American's involved can be considered serendipitous. The concept of mutual benefits flowing from international cooperation was merely an idea at the time of project design and implementation. As was reported in this study, the fundamentals of mutuality were present in the design of the project, but the careful orientation and implementation of actions to ensure mutuality were not developed. It was only through the personal initiative of individuals and the nature of Extension's relationship with its publics, that benefits to U.S. organizations and communities evolved. Based on the experiences from this project, future projects can be even more impactful!

Community Anticipation and Awareness

In hindsight, the importance of continuing contact with the home office and community while on assignment was underestimated and overlooked. As one of the first projects in the technical cooperation rather than technical assistance mode, greater effort should have been spent in preparing participants and county offices for potential contributions back home. But in fact little of that was done. The questionnaire data suggests that most communications between the participant and their home office rested on the initiation of the participant. Highest ratings for continuing contact occurred in *preparing slides and notes for explaining the assignment* and *receiving resources requested*. Office staffs confirm that they were more than happy to respond to requests and were proud of their ability to maintain contact. But unless the participant initiated communications, little interaction resulted. Colleagues and county offices needed guidance in realizing the opportunities and benefits of continuing contact and visibility with the public.

On the other hand, in a number of cases, both colleagues and clientele were brought into the project through visits or exchanges while the participant was in Poland or shortly thereafter. In these cases, strong bonds of collaboration began that have continued and often expanded. For example an exchange of professional Home Economists in the U.S. and Poland evolved in two states that brought a number of other agents into the international arena for the first time and created awareness and visibility for international programs in numerous communities across the states and provinces involved. The strong involvement of 4-H agents, leaders and youth in several states created a strong network of interested persons that resulted in a number of opportunities for youth exchanges, interactions and linkages. Professionals in one state developed a quarterly newsletter about the Polish 4-H program to maintain these networks. That newsletter "Polish 4-H Connections" has a circulation of over 1500. Many individuals in this network are providing personalized assistance to the Polish 4-H Foundation in both fund raising and in programming support. Over \$100,000 has been collected and donated to the Polish 4-H Foundation over the past five years through these efforts. These expanded networks of professionals and citizens involved in Poland's development are testaments to the strength of the Extension system in encouraging participation and creating opportunities for involvement.

Family Issues

In the majority of families (61%), family members lived in Poland or visited (69%) while the participant was on-assignment. Three spouses who did not live in Poland described the experience as stressful or lonely. But even for the spouses who accompanied their mates, living in Poland had its ups and downs. Looking back, these spouses report that the experience was a wonderful growth enhancing time. But the language barriers, lack of information about consumer issues in Poland, and difficulties of finding one's way in a new community were stressful. Both spouses who stayed at home and those who lived in Poland learned to be more responsible, resourceful and independent.

Living in Poland was a special treat for children. Polish neighbors and associates were especially welcoming of children and helped to integrate them and their parents into the daily life of the community. Most children who attended school learned to speak Polish easily. In fact they often served as translators for their struggling parents! Older children have been motivated to do more international travel or to choose career paths with an international emphasis. Some children have returned to Poland on their own, or invited Polish friends for various stays in the U.S. Generally these families are now more embedded in the international life of their communities.

In commenting on the difficulties of living in Poland, spouses often questioned the project's policies. Although they were welcomed by the Warsaw staff to attend social events, they were treated as outsiders in all professional interactions. There was a cost to the family in bringing family members to Poland and there remained a cost in having them live in Poland. Spouses also noted that they rarely had help from the project in translating, transportation or seeking information. They really had to rely on themselves or the good will of their neighbors and friends. In many ways, the project did not seem to fully appreciate the support provided by family members and probably never anticipated the importance of family member involvement in subsequent impacts on U.S. communities. The fact that it was often the spouse, not the participant who maintained communications with the home community is often overlooked. One coworker captured this contribution by noting, "I think his wife sort of kept us up-to-date more, you know [about] how things were going for him and all."

Organizational Climate Supporting International Activities

Clearly there is a realization that Extension is a part of the international mission of the Land Grant System and that operationalizing that mission needs greater attention. Currently there exists a disconnect between the organizational rhetoric and reality. On a continuum between very supportive and proactive on one end, to laissez faire in the middle, to discouraging on the opposite end, extension organizations visited during the site visits could be arrayed across the spectrum. With the exception of only one or two states, all states gave the impression of supporting an international dimension, but had no concrete evidence to backup the assertions. Qualitative data from the interviews suggests that few policies and structures are in place concerning international activities within Extension. Participation in international assignments, as well as international programming is treated on an individual basis and depends on self-initiation. Generally, there is no one person assigned for leadership at the state level. And many state administrators just assume that others in the organization are looking after these concerns. Attitudes that international assignments are "junkets" still remain in some organizations. And the concept of having a responsibility to provide global information and education to the citizens of the state is often interpreted as "staying competitive in international markets". Given these realities, it is surprising that as many states sent personnel to participate

in the PAEP and that their participation had such positive effects in the states! Perhaps these data can reinforce the emerging voices of those interested in strengthening organizational commitments and involvements in internationalizing Extension.

Backfill

Within the PAEP, salaries for participants were reimbursed to the states. Therefore monies were available to hire alternative personnel to cover for the absent professional. The term used for this process of providing coverage is referred to in this document as “backfill.” Surprisingly, several sites did not hire persons to backfill the vacant positions. In some cases it was felt that no qualified persons were available for that period of time, and in other cases, county administrators were unaware that monies were available. In these instances, other colleagues or volunteers assumed the work of the person on assignment. In some cases they were reimbursed for their extra work, in other cases they were not. Three of the sites visited did hire alternative personnel--retirees, skilled volunteers, new professionals or graduate students. Generally programs continued and clientele were not inconvenienced. In many of these situations, the alternative hire grew in skills and competence and thus viewed the experience as very positive. Most immediate supervisions noted that orienting, training and monitoring these individuals new to their roles was time consuming but generally manageable. The concept and experience with backfill or coverage was not new to most supervisors. This is an ongoing administrative issue as staff turnover and redeployment is an ongoing feature of Extension work. Some of the variation in the way backfill issues were addressed in regard to PAEP participation stemmed from severe budget tightening. Many organizations were reorganizing, shifting personnel and reallocating duties. In some of these cases the PAEP assignments were treated as part of this ongoing activity. However, unanimously, respondents in the interview process recognized the importance of backfill to maintain continuity of programming and prevent stress and overload that punishes home personnel when others are on assignment!