

**Teaching and Educational Commentary**

# Agribusiness Study Abroad Programs and Their Potential for Fostering a More Inclusive Climate

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**Abstract**

Study abroad programs can make meaningful contributions to undergraduate agribusiness education and can be designed and executed to effectively contribute to a campus and departmental culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). To be most effective in furthering goals of inclusive excellence, program faculty should understand the unique challenges and opportunities associated with agribusiness-focused study abroad programs and common barriers to participation of underrepresented minority (URM) students. This article describes the experience of faculty and staff during the program design, scholarship fundraising, and student recruitment for an “Agribusiness in Mexico” program at California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly). This case shows how insights and evidence from the literature on inclusivity in study abroad programs relate to the needs of agribusiness industry employers for improved cultural and linguistic competency among their workforces. The article offers specific conclusions and recommendations for program development related to location and topic of study, securing industry involvement and financial support for the program, and establishing scholarship and program timelines that minimize barriers for students with financial need.

## 1. Introduction

Attracting diverse student populations and developing a culture of inclusive excellence are priorities of many agribusiness and agricultural economics programs, as well as the colleges in which they reside. To be successful in diversity and inclusivity efforts, it is important to expand our focus beyond broad, objective diversity metrics, such as the demographics of the student body and disparities in time-to-degree-completion for different student segments. In addition to these measures, college and departmental leadership and faculty should be making efforts to ensure that all students are represented, feel valued, and have access to the extra and co-curricular activities that have been shown to significantly impact educational outcomes and students’ personal and professional development (Sweeney 2013).

Study abroad programs are widely recognized as high-impact educational experiences and have gained popularity because of the personal and professional value that they provide students (Vernon, Moos, and Loncarich 2017). While there are some examples of successful study abroad programs that focus on agribusiness management in an international context (e.g. Ames and Houston 2001; Gibson et al. 2012; Beseli et al. 2016), agribusiness and agricultural economics are not common topic areas of study abroad programs at U.S. universities. Given the continuing trends of internationalization in the agriculture industry, there is strong potential for study abroad programs to make meaningful contributions to agribusiness programs at the undergraduate level, and agribusiness faculty have an opportunity to design these programs in a way that also furthers university and departmental goals of inclusive excellence. In this context, it is important that educators and administrators that are working toward greater inclusivity in agribusiness education understand the unique opportunities and challenges involved with study abroad programs.

This short article describes the efforts and lessons learned by faculty and staff at California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly) in San Luis Obispo, CA, during the development of the “Agribusiness in Mexico” faculty-led study abroad program. The Agribusiness Department at Cal Poly, like many others across the country, provides undergraduate students with a curriculum and co-curricular programming that is industry-relevant and creates value for both students and industry employers. In the context of California agriculture, this increasingly requires exposure to international business operations, particularly food and agriculture production and distribution operations in Latin America. This case highlights the intersection between insights from the literature on inclusivity in study abroad programming and calls from industry stakeholders for stronger cultural and linguistic skills among agribusiness graduates. By creating study abroad programming with greater diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as an explicit goal, objectives related to both DEI and industry relevance can be achieved.

## **2. The Agribusiness in Mexico Faculty-Led Study Abroad Program**

As with many of the agribusiness-focused international programs across the country, Cal Poly’s Agribusiness in Mexico program was developed in response to the growing internationalization of the agriculture industry and the calls to better educate students in international agribusiness operations (Wolf and Schaffner 2000; Gillespie and Bampasidou 2018; Urban, Navarro, and Borron 2018). These trends of internationalization are particularly strong in the specialty crops sector, and with respect to integration of the agricultural supply chains of the United States and Mexico. From 2008 to 2020, the share of U.S. consumption that comes from imports has increased from 26 percent to 43 percent in the case of vegetables and melons, and from 36 percent to 51 percent in the case of fruits and tree nuts (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service 2022). Canales, Andrango, and Williams (2019) shows that imports of specialty crops from Mexico to the United States have seen tremendous growth in the past 20 years, as has foreign direct investment in Mexico’s agricultural sector. Avocados and berries have been key areas of growth in imports from Mexico (Canales et al. 2019), both of which are dominated in the United States by California-based firms that are major employers of Cal Poly agribusiness graduates.

The Cal Poly Agribusiness in Mexico program was designed as an 8-week faculty-led program during the summer term, to be based in Santiago de Querétaro, Mexico. Students were to take a Spanish course, taught by local instructors at a partner institution, along with courses in global agribusiness logistics and the world food economy taught by the Cal Poly faculty leader. A key focus of the program was the opportunity for close interaction between students and leading agricultural firms from California that have major operations in Mexico. As a UNESCO world heritage site known for its beautiful historic central city and low crime rate, Santiago de Querétaro provided easy access to production and processing facilities of the industry partners and is also an attractive place to live and learn more about Mexico and its people. The intent of the program was not only to provide Cal Poly students with exposure to the Latin American operations of California-based agricultural firms, but also to help students develop the linguistic and cross-cultural skills that these firms increasingly seek in employees. An early focus during the development of the Agribusiness in Mexico program was fundraising for student scholarships. Industry support was strong, and more than \$35,000 was raised from partner firms to fund scholarships for students with high financial need.

The first Agribusiness in Mexico trip was scheduled for an 8-week period from late June to mid-August 2020. An inaugural student cohort of 13 students was successfully recruited in late 2019 and early 2020 through a combination of classroom visits by the program leader, participation in a study abroad fair, and promotion through the campus study abroad office. Although recruitment went well and student targets were met, all university-sponsored international programs were canceled in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the continuing uncertainty regarding COVID-19,

recruitment was not attempted in 2021. Recruitment for the Agribusiness in Mexico 2022 program was attempted in late 2019 and early 2022, but the program was ultimately cancelled due to low student enrollment, which was in part driven by continuing COVID-19 restrictions and safety concerns. While some of Cal Poly's study abroad programs did take place in spring and summer of 2022, student applications were down overall relative to pre-pandemic numbers. Despite the disappointing outcome for this program in 2020 and 2022, the several years of program development and student recruitment and feedback has led to some important lessons for the role that study abroad programs can play in DEI efforts in agribusiness and agricultural economics programs in the United States.

### **3. Minority Students Come to These Programs from a Position of Strength**

Perhaps the most notable observation from several years spent discussing the Agribusiness in Mexico program with students is that the program seemed to resonate strongly with Latino/a students. DEI was not a primary focus of this program when development began in 2018, but a disproportionate number of Latino/a students responded with enthusiasm and great interest when introduced to the program through presentations to their classes or other occasions. In many cases, students that had been rather quiet and reserved in class became more animated and excited in discussions about studying abroad in Mexico. The program's messaging emphasized the value of linguistic and cultural competency skills in the agribusiness industry and this served to communicate that the department and university valued the contributions and skills that many of these students bring to the table from their personal lives. Unfortunately, students from immigrant families, or who are the first in their families to attend college, often feel like they are coming from outside of the dominant culture of the institution. In this context, the foundational premise of the Agribusiness in Mexico program, that some of the largest agricultural firms in the state seek managers that can work across cultures, languages, and borders, must seem particularly affirming.

Indeed, underrepresented minority (URM) students that are used to navigating across cultures, and particularly heritage language learners in their heritage language-speaking country, come to programs like the Agribusiness in Mexico program from a position of strength. The literature on study abroad education has found that students with existing cross-cultural skills often become leaders in the context of international travel (Marijuan and Sanz 2018), and may find program activities and industry engagement during the trip more meaningful (Davidson and Lekic 2013).

Communicating the value of linguistic and cultural skills to students can have significant impacts on the perceived inclusiveness of an academic program, thus furthering stated DEI goals. While there is no firm evidence that the existence and promotion of the Agribusiness in Mexico study abroad program improves the attractiveness of the Agribusiness Management major among URM students, it is clear that URM students, and Latino/a students in particular, are disproportionately drawn to this study abroad program. In Fall 2021, 19 percent of the Cal Poly student body identified as Hispanic or Latino/a, and 53 percent identified as White. Consistent with national trends, White students are overrepresented in Cal Poly study abroad programs, making up 68 percent of all participating students in the 2018/2019 academic year. In the same year, Hispanic or Latino/a students made up only 8 percent of study abroad students. In contrast, more than half (56 percent) of the applicants to the Agribusiness in Mexico program in 2020 and 2022 were Latino/a and only 39 percent were White.

## 4. There Are Barriers to Success, and Departments and Universities Need to Be Committed to DEI Goals

Although there appears to be strong potential for industry and career-focused study abroad programs to further the internationalization and inclusivity goals of agribusiness and agricultural economics programs, there are also barriers to success. The challenges discussed in this section were identified through conversations with students and campus international programs staff over several years of program development and recruitment, along with written feedback solicited from students that applied to the program in 2020 and 2022.

First, the direct and indirect costs of participation in an 8-week faculty-led study abroad program in the summer are significant<sup>1</sup> and are often cited as a barrier to participation. While students of all demographic groups cite the cost of the Agribusiness in Mexico program as a challenge, low-income students are most likely to be discouraged from attending because of financial constraints. The feedback from students interested in the Agribusiness in Mexico program is consistent with the literature on barriers to study abroad participation generally, which shows that cost is the most significant barrier to international study (Whatley and Raby 2020), and that minoritized students likely face the strongest financial challenges (Taylor and Turk 2019). Moreover, given that much of the appeal of the Agribusiness in Mexico program is the promise of industry interaction and career-relevant courses on international food and agricultural supply chains, the students that are attracted to this program are likely among the most driven to pursue summer internships or other paid industry work, which increases the opportunity cost of program participation. For many students, the relevance of the courses and ability to use the summer program to speed their time to degree completion was a strong selling point, although that limits appeal somewhat to students majoring or minoring in Agribusiness Management that need these courses to satisfy degree requirements.

Second, while the location of Cal Poly's Agribusiness in Mexico program (Querétaro, Mexico) is often cited as a positive program attribute by students with a family connection to Mexico, it also seems to be considered less attractive than other study abroad options by many students. It has been frequently observed in the study abroad literature that European destinations are preferred by many students (Garver and Divine 2007) and receive more study abroad students from the United States than all other regions combined (Institute of International Education 2022). Although industry-relevant international programs may be attractive to agribusiness students, and URM students in particular, the locations of these programs may limit their broader appeal. This could be problematic if the financial viability of the program is dependent on high enrollment numbers.

A third barrier to success for career-focused study abroad trips designed with URM students in mind is that recruitment may be more challenging and labor intensive than for more traditional study abroad programs. Simon and Ainsworth (2012) explain that some of the racial and class disparity in study abroad participation can be explained by a lack of familiarity and comfort with the study abroad process within the students' social and family networks. Indeed, recruitment for the Agribusiness in Mexico program appeared to be more time consuming than for other programs at Cal Poly, with more individual conversations with interested students before an application was submitted. This might have been due to a higher number of prospective program participants that had little existing knowledge of the study abroad process or fewer people within their networks of friends and family that have themselves participated in a study abroad experience. It might also have to do with the fact that the program did not have an established history on campus, and there were no past student participants available to share information. In any event, to ensure that these programs are truly accessible to students that do not have the guidance and financial resources of parents and other mentors with their

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<sup>1</sup> The program fee for the 8-week Agribusiness in Mexico program, including room and board, group travel while in country, and tuition for three courses, was projected at roughly \$8,500 in 2022.



own college study abroad experiences, international program staff and faculty leaders must be willing and able to provide greater levels of predeparture support.

## **5. Suggestions for Successfully Developing and Executing an Inclusive Study Abroad Program**

We learned several lessons over the course of developing and recruiting students for Cal Poly's Agribusiness in Mexico program that may help other faculty develop inclusive, industry-relevant study abroad experiences. First, if interested in making study abroad programs inclusive and more representative of campus demographics, program leaders should focus on designing programs to address the needs of URM students rather than relying on targeting them with promotion of existing programs. In terms of the four "Ps" of marketing, too much emphasis is often placed on "promotion" of study abroad experiences rather than design of the "product." The experience at Cal Poly illustrates the importance of program design. Despite the fact that no special effort was made to promote the Agribusiness in Mexico program to Latino/a students, the program received many more applications from this group than most other programs on campus, suggesting that the program addressed an unmet demand.

Designing a study abroad program for inclusivity might involve reconsidering the timing of the program to accommodate the needs of students with fewer financial resources. Cal Poly's Agribusiness in Mexico was planned for the summer term, originally for the sake of convenience for the faculty leader and ease of scheduling. It became apparent during recruitment efforts that this was a mistake, and that students who cite cost as a primary barrier to participation also seem to be more likely to prioritize work during the summer months. Moving a program to the spring or the fall could potentially increase the number of URM students that are able to participate. This is an area that should be explored further on a case-by-case basis given the potential impact on time-to-degree completion.

The second lesson learned relates to successful fundraising from industry sponsors. When initially approaching industry connections for support, program leaders should be able to articulate a clear vision for how the partner firm can help the program in a nonfinancial way. In the case of Agribusiness in Mexico, we asked firms, most of which had existing relationships with Cal Poly's Agribusiness Department, if they would be willing to host students for a tour of their Mexican facilities or engage with students on projects related to the structure of the firm's North American supply chains. This in-country industry interaction was critical to the design and educational mission of the program, but it was also central to attracting prospective students and showing that the program was relevant to their career. Moreover, once firms had already considered interacting with students on the trip, they were much more receptive to subsequent requests for student scholarship funding. This industry support seemed to build on itself when industry leaders heard that others in the industry were planning on hosting students and/or providing scholarships funds.

Third, while the direct support for students with financial need is important, the scholarship system should be designed in a way that reduces the risk and uncertainty involved in the students' decisions to participate in the program. In the case of the Agribusiness in Mexico program, the faculty leader and international programs staff did not determine scholarship awardees until the final program applications were due, mostly for the sake of administrative convenience. While this system was easy to manage, it did not provide students with clarity on their cost of participation while discussing the program with their families and considering other options for the summer. As a result, some students that would have been top candidates for financial support may have been discouraged from moving beyond the initial stages of information gathering. If administratively possible, it would be preferable to have an early scholarship application and award process, allowing students to consider programs with

full information about costs, similar to the example provided by Tolan and McCullers (2018).<sup>2</sup> If such a scholarship system were adopted, it would have the secondary benefit of providing program leaders with more information on the number of applicants with financial need, which could help in raising additional funds from industry sponsors.

The final suggestion is that program leaders should make efforts to demonstrate to URM students that they are likely in a strong position to benefit both personally and professionally from study abroad programs. While faculty leaders can communicate this to students, it may be more convincing when these messages come from their peers that have already participated in study abroad experiences (Tolan and McCullers 2018). If past program participants are not available, as will necessarily be the case with new programs, recent graduates working in international agribusiness roles may be able to speak in general terms about the value of international experience and cultural competence. It is particularly important that these “ambassadors” are able to relate to URM students through shared experience or a shared cultural background so that all prospective participants feel that they are welcome, and that the program is designed with their personal and professional well-being and growth in mind.

## 6. Conclusion

The goal of this article is to share the experiences from the development of a study abroad program focused on the international agribusiness industry and located in Central Mexico. While aspects of this process have been challenging, this program and programs like it have the potential to further curricular goals related to the internationalization of agriculture, and also the DEI goals of agribusiness and agricultural economics departments. The article advocates for the design of agribusiness study abroad programs with an intentional focus on accessibility of programs for student populations that are typically underrepresented in many undergraduate programs in agribusiness management, and in study abroad programs generally. The key insight is that many of the design decisions involved in the development of an international study abroad program, including location, topical focus, and approach to program marketing and recruitment, can create an environment that is more welcoming and attractive to URM students.

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<sup>2</sup> The University of Texas–Austin has a program in which first-generation college students are eligible for a \$3,000 award that can be used toward any of the university’s approved study abroad programs. The award is granted after the student’s first semester on campus and can be used at any point during their time at the university.

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