

TRIP REPORT

Spring Break (2010) Study Tour to Honduras

Office of International Programs
College of Agricultural Sciences
The Pennsylvania State University

Submitted by

Leif Jensen
Professor of Rural Sociology and Demography
Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology

"It was a life changing experience!"

Community, Environment and Development (CED) student

With generous support from the College of Agricultural Sciences' Office of International Programs and Penn State's Office of Global Programs, nine Penn State students and three chaperones went on a study tour to Honduras during Spring Break, 2010. This document reports on that experience.



Background

In the Fall of 2008 the College of Agricultural Sciences opened a new major in Community, Environment and Development (CED) offered by the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology. At present the program already claims over 100 majors and counting, and is attracting considerable interest among students in Penn State's Schreyer Honors College. The students are distributed roughly equally across the major's three options or tracks – community and economic development, environmental economics and policy, and international development. While it is a young program, it is already clear that students are yearning for practical real-world experiences as a crucial complement to what they are gaining in the classroom. This is particularly true for those in the international development option. This study tour was motivated principally by the desire to provide just that kind of experience.

Also pertinent to the background of the study tour is the College's strong and emerging links with the Pan-American Agricultural School, better known as Zamorano University. Located in a rural and agricultural region southeast of the capital Tegucigalpa, Zamorano is the region's elite agricultural university, and is perfectly situated physically, substantively, and institutionally to engage with the CED program in mutually supportive ways. Importantly, Zamorano offers an undergraduate academic program in Socioeconomic Development and Environment (DSEA), which is remarkably similar to CED.

Given our need for international experiences and our institutional links to Zamorano, it seemed only natural to propose a study tour to that region of Honduras. The current Director of DSEA, Prof. Arie Sanders, was a central force in organizing this study tour, and Penn State is indebted to him for his continued support and enthusiasm. Also instrumental in organizing the itinerary and providing intellectual leadership was Prof. Bruce Erwood, Professor Emeritus of Ohio University, who was in residence at Zamorano at the time of this trip and who has extensive experience working in Honduras. We are likewise indebted to Dr. Erwood. Finally, two Ph.D. students in Rural Sociology – David Ader and J. Dara Bloom – provided invaluable assistance, insight, and expert translation, greatly enhancing the total experience for the students.

Goals

This one-week field trip to Honduras was intended to provide a broad overview of the many issues facing local economic development initiatives in rural communities. The trip exposed students to local projects and initiatives developed in recent years in the Yeguaré Valley (in which Zamorano is located) to improve the local economy and reduce extreme poverty. These processes have been slow in developing, very difficult to achieve, and have not always met with positive results. Through visits to NGOs, local governments, grass roots groups, cooperatives and the like, the intent was to provide an opportunity for students to see and explore the challenges of economic and social development in the Global South, and to interact with those striving for positive change.



Pedagogical Approach

Students who went on the study tour enrolled in CED 497B (Honduras Study Experience) which was taught by David Ader. Students could take the course for one to three credits. Students taking the course for one credit merely attended informational meetings and went on the trip. Students attending weekly one-hour classes in advance of the trip – during which background information on Honduras and its development challenges were presented – received two credits. Those writing a paper on their experience received three. Most students took the course the for three credits.

While in Honduras the goals of the study tour were achieved by beginning each day with short in-class presentations that introduced the topics and themes for a given day of the tour. These discussion-oriented lectures were then followed by day-long trips that usually featured multiple stops along the way. The activities of the week are briefly summarized below.

Annotated Itinerary

Saturday, 6 March, 2010

- Students met late in the evening on campus to board a Penn State van for a drive to the Baltimore-Washington International (BWI) Airport in Baltimore



Sunday, 7 March, 2010

- Arrival in Tegucigalpa. Met by Arie Sanders and Bruce Erwood for bus ride to Zamorano University. Students got settled in at the Kellogg Center, an on-campus hotel.

Monday, 8 March 2010

- Introduction to the DSEA program at Zamorano
- Introduction to Honduras: Lecture and discussion
- Trip to Güinope

Students boarded three Land Rover-type vehicles for an hour-long drive to Güinope, a small town south-southeast of Zamorano. They met with the local mayor and his colleagues who discussed local economic development initiatives and challenges. There was ample time for questions and answers. Students then travelled to a nearby farm and learned about the proprietor's efforts in the area of rural tourism. On the return to Zamorano the students visited Playa Ancha, an entrepreneurial project featuring man-made beaches and swimming.



Tuesday, 9 March 2010

- Introduction to microenterprise and microfinance: Lecture and discussion
- Trip to Yuscarán

Students were driven to Yuscarán, southeast of Zamorano. They visited the Yuscarán Credit Union, the cooperative offices for micro-entrepreneurs working in the pine resin industry, and a pine resin collection operation. They also visited a women's enterprise organization and their paper-making operation.



Wednesday, 10 March 2010

- Introduction to small-scale agriculture: Lecture and discussion
- Visit to Moroceli
Students were driven to Moroceli, east-northeast of Zamorano. Here they visited the offices of ASOCIAL, an NGO that involves local farmers – men and women alike – in local agricultural research, thus disseminating and systematically evaluating new agricultural practices and technologies.
- Learning by doing
A defining feature of instruction at Zamorano University is their "learning by doing" pedagogy. Our Penn State students got a taste of that by learning how to build a small stove from crude and locally available materials.



Thursday, 11 March 2010

- Introduction to water management and local governance: Lecture and discussion
- Visit to Zarzal
Students were driven to Zarzal, east-southeast of Zamorano and not far from Yuscarán. Zarzal is a very small and rural settlement. They listened to and interacted with local community leaders and citizens with a wide ranging discussion of development challenges. A key focus was provision of dependable supplies of clean water to the village, a discussion facilitated by a retired professor from Cornell who lived locally. Students also learned about local health issues.
- Visit to the Uyuca Preserve
Students were driven to the Uyuca Preserve, a mountainous nature preserve just west of Zamorano and owned by the university. There the students hiked up the nearby mountain (meeting along the way a group of Zamorano students engaged in a learning-by-doing module). Following a picnic and campfire, the students collected insects in the dark in a small expedition led by a Zamorano entomologist.





Friday, 12 March 2010

- Visit to Tegucigalpa and Valle de Ángeles
Students were driven into the capital city of Tegucigalpa, west of Zamorano, where they met at the offices of the U.S. Peace Corps for Honduras. Students were inspired by a presentation on Peace Corps activities in the country, and the opportunity to interact with the local country director. The group was then given a guided tour of the National Historical Museum, which many found informative. The afternoon was spent in Valle de Ángeles, a quaint if tourist-oriented town northwest of Zamorano. Students had a chance to walk the town on their own and shop for souvenirs and locally produced clothing, arts and crafts.

Saturday-Sunday, 13-14 March, 2010

- Students boarded a Zamorano bus for an early afternoon flight home, arriving back on the Penn State campus at about 6:00 a.m. on Sunday.



Accolades

The students found this Spring Break Study Tour to be extremely valuable. Following are comments received in response to two student evaluations, one conducted by Arie Sanders at Zamorano, and the other by David Ader at Penn State.

"The experience was one of the most educational weeks of my life, as it allowed me to see first hand how international and community development can work."

"I honestly believe I saw the true meeting of community development at the most local level ... a trip like this is crucial for the learning process of the CED major."

"This experience went above and beyond my expectations. I saw community development in a whole different perspective (sometimes it was effective, and other times not) and I gained a new respect for Honduras and its people."

"The overall experience has been amazing and encouraged me to continue to work in the development field. In particular, it showed me that the will of the people can fight against all odds and find success, even with everything stacked against them."

"This trip gave me insight and an experience of things that I would never even be able to comprehend by living in central PA if I hadn't experienced it firsthand. The trip was truly excellent!"

"I can sit at my computer and read or listen to a lecture about poverty, development, and preservation of natural resources in other countries, but until you go and get a glimpse of the way things really are, you have no idea."



Looking to the future

Another important Spring Break experience that has benefitted CED and other students is a study tour to Costa Rica. The faculty involved in the CED International Development option plan to alternate between these two trips with the Honduras trip occurring in odd years. We recognize that the generous level of funding we received from the College of Agricultural Sciences was on a one-time basis as a way to assess the value of this experience. We recognize further that the significant and complementary funding we received from Penn State's Office of Global Programs cannot be counted on the future. It is important to point out that several students indicated they would have been willing to pay much more of their way than they did, especially since it was such a positive experience. That said, we will need to find alternative sources of funding for the Honduras study tour. The CED faculty look forward to working with the College to procure this support, as we feel this study abroad experience, and those like it, are absolutely essential to a well-rounded education, especially for our CED International Development students.

