

Student Expectations and Reflections of a Study Away Course Experience to Washington, D.C.

Courtney Meyers and Shannon Arnold

Abstract

Active, out-of-the-class learning experiences have proven to provide students with a variety of benefits. One way to offer these valuable experiential education opportunities this is through study away to international or domestic destinations. The purpose of this study was to explore students' perceptions of a study away course experience to Washington, D.C. This course was a collaborative effort between two universities. Twenty-two students participated in the study away experience and 21 completed pre- and post-trip questionnaires to determine their expectations and reflections of the experience. Through qualitative analysis of students' open-ended responses, emergent themes were identified. Students expected to gain a new experience, network with others, and have an enjoyable trip. Post-trip reflections revealed students gained a great deal more than they anticipated, both personally and academically. Recommendations for practice and research are provided.

Key Words

Content Analysis, Expectations, Experiential Learning, Qualitative, Study Away, Reflection, Washington, D.C.

Literature Review

According to the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC, 2000), "the United States needs its higher education sector to provide leaders who can understand and guide the economic, political, and social forces that will control or influence the path of the international community in the 21st century" (p. 3). Study abroad programs assist in accomplishing this need by developing students' cultural awareness, broadening the academic experience, and building personal skills (Bobbitt & Akers, 2012; Northfell & Edgar, 2014). Although they may realize the importance of studying abroad, many college students are unable to take advantage of that opportunity due to limitations on time, finances, or lack of opportunity. An Institute of International Education (2011) study found college representatives said "more affordable opportunities for students to gain international experience" are needed (para. 6). One way students can gain a more global perspective is to participate in a "study away" experience. Sobania and Braskamp (2009) suggested the term "study away" be used as both a "concept and educational strategy that integrates study abroad programs with domestic programs" (p. 23). While study abroad opportunities are valuable in developing personal and professional skills, domestic-based programs can also encourage positive learning outcomes. "As both a concept and strategy, study away recognizes that students can have experiences that open their minds, hearts, and behaviors to difference and allows them to experience such difference firsthand, either internationally or domestically" (Sobania & Braskamp, 2009, p. 24).

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Previous research has found that active engagement in learning is an important concept of undergraduate education (Anderson & Adams, 1992; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991). Out-of-the class learning experiences are a significant part of the overall undergraduate experience and should be provided to enhance critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, leadership skills, and personal development (Kuh, 1995; Seidman & Brown, 2006; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Bliming, 1996). Seidman and Brown (2006) discussed the need for college instructors to reevaluate delivery of classroom material to maximize outside experiences. Studies have found that these experiences are more valuable than those in the classroom (Kuh 1993, 1995; Nathan, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996; Tinto, 1997). Nathan (2005) found that 65% of undergraduate students reported they learned more outside the classroom than within. Kuh (1993, 1996) reported that integrating outside experiences into a course creates a seamless learning experience for both students and faculty.

In a study to determine what skills and knowledge agricultural communications students should have, Sprecker and Rudd (1997) found students need to possess communication skills along with knowledge of agricultural topics and opportunities to network with industry representatives. These fundamental skills in communication and agricultural knowledge were also identified in a study of agricultural communications faculty members' opinions of agricultural communication curriculum needs (Morgan & Rucker, 2013). A national study of employers, faculty, alumni, and students ranked communications skills as the most important soft skill set for college graduates to possess (Crawford, Lang, Fink, Dalton, & Fielitz, 2011). Among the different types of respondents, the most effective learning environments were guided, active learning experiences such as internships, co-curricular activities, and experiential education opportunities (Crawford et al., 2011).

The purpose of this study was to explore students' perceptions of a study away course experience to Washington, D.C. Study away experiences are one of the many types of activities used to engage students in learning beyond the classroom. Exposing students to various cultures, environments, and activities assists in practical application of knowledge in different contexts (Buriak, McNurlen, & Harper, 1996; Phipps, Osborne, Dyer, & Ball, 2008; Townsend & Briers, 1990). The long-term impacts of study away experiences have been shown to improve students' links between personal, physical, and social contexts that assist in the application of prior knowledge to new experiences (Falk & Dierking, 1997). Beard and Wilson (2006) emphasized the importance of placing careful consideration on the experiential activity design and environment in order for the learning to be effective.

The study away course researched in this manuscript was a partnership between two universities designed to help students better understand how policy decisions regarding agricultural issues are made and communicated. Washington, D.C. was selected as the destination because it is home to federal agencies, lobbying firms, and special interest groups that all have significant roles in the development, integration, and distribution of agricultural knowledge that impacts people both nationwide and abroad. This course met one to two times monthly during the spring semester to prepare for the trip on May 26-June 1, 2013. Students were financially responsible for class tuition and certain travel costs; the majority of expenses were supplied through grant funding. The faculty collaborated on developing the same course for both universities with required enrollment in the semester prior to the trip. During the week in Washington, D.C., students visited 12 agricultural organizations – including the House Committee on Agriculture, a lobbying firm, and special interest groups – and took notes in a journal to encourage later reflection. The goal of this trip was to help students better understand how policy decisions are made regarding agricultural issues. Visiting a range of agricultural organizations assisted students in understanding how all these units work together to make major decisions for agriculture. At all points during this trip, the emphasis was on communication efforts and how they were employed to influence, persuade, educate and inform a diverse group of stakeholders. Students also met with university alumni

wherever possible to discuss how they were using their degrees and to gather advice from these former students. Finally, time was allotted during the trip for students to visit national monuments and explore historical sites on their own.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning (1984), which is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p.41). Kolb (1984) said knowledge was the result of both grasping and transforming experience. Experiential learning creates concrete experiences for learners to engage, apply, reflect, and experiment with concepts learned (Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, Kielsmeier, & Benson, 2006). Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle identifies four components: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The concrete experience is described as an experience useful for testing and validating abstract concepts, ideas, and implications for personal application (Arnold, Warner, & Osborne, 2006; Kolb, 1984). The reflective observation component fosters critical thinking and self-directed learning that engages students both mentally and emotionally in the experience (Proudman, 1992; Zilbert & Leske, 1989). Abstract conceptualization forces learners to make generalizations about principles learned and discover new application methods. Active experimentation promotes the transfer of learning to a different context. Students engage in a "trial-and-error" process where the other components of the model are tested (Petkus, 2000). Overall, experiential education can "provide greater depth of information processing, and thus a greater potential impact on learning, than less active methods" (Robinson & Torres, 2007, p. 2).

Purpose & Research Questions

Prior studies have explored how to improve aspects of the agricultural communications curriculum such as developing students' writing identity (Leggette, Jarvis, & Walther, 2015), describing agricultural publication capstone courses (Hall, Rhoades, Agunga, 2009; Rushing, Miller, Edgar, & Cox, 2014), and integrating service learning (Kelemen, Cartmell, & Sitton, 2009). Morgan led several studies to develop agricultural communications curriculum based on feedback from industry (Morgan, 2010), alumni (Morgan, 2012), and faculty (Morgan & Rucker, 2013). Northfell and Edgar (2014) reported on agricultural communications students' perceptions to international experiences, but the current paper is the first to document the impact of a study away experience focused on agricultural communications. The purpose of this study was to explore students' perceptions of a study away course experience to Washington, D.C. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What were students' expectations regarding the study away experience in Washington, D.C.?
2. What were students' reflections upon completion of the study away experience in Washington, D.C.?

Methodology

The population for this study was 22 students enrolled in a required special problems course at each university in Spring 2013. Eleven students attended from each university with a total of six graduate students and 16 undergraduates. Twelve students were pursuing a degree in agricultural education and 10 students were agricultural communications majors. Students were required to complete a pre-trip and post-trip survey to discover any change in values, knowledge, attitudes, and aspirations. Questions were derived from previous literature on out-of-class and experiential learning important for undergraduate education (Anderson & Adams, 1992; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991; Kolb, 1984; Leggette, Black, McKim, &

Lawrence, 2013). Questions on the pre-trip questionnaire assessed students' expectations for the study-away trip, personal and professional goals related to the experience, perceptions of collaborating with another institution, and perceived connections of trip experiences to coursework. The post-trip questionnaire gauged satisfaction with the study away experience, knowledge gained, analysis of most valuable visits, opinions of collaboration with other university students, and the link of experiences to coursework and goals. Students were also asked to summarize what they learned at each agency; however, those findings are not reported here. The majority of survey questions were open-ended to allow student reflection before and after the experience.

The pre-and post-trip questionnaires were designed in SurveyMonkey. The pre-trip questionnaire was open for one month at the beginning of the spring course and the post-trip questionnaire was open for 10 days immediately following the study trip. Data collection procedures outlined by Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2009) were followed for web survey implementation. The pre-trip survey consisted of 13 questions; the post-trip survey had 27 questions. Only questions that directly related to this manuscript's research questions were used in data analysis. One student did not complete the post-trip survey, so the final response rate was 95%.

To analyze open-ended responses, all data were entered into NVivo 8.0 qualitative software for content analysis. "Content analysis is a technique that enables researchers to study human behavior in an indirect way through an analysis of their communications" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 472). Content analysis is useful to identify, organize, code, and label themes found within the data (Patton, 2002). In NVivo, each student's pre- and post-trip questionnaire responses were entered as individual sources. Pseudonyms were assigned prior to coding to ensure confidentiality. For the coding process, the data were first categorized by topic and labeled with a descriptive term (Creswell, 2013). These codes were then organized into themes, which are "broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea" (Creswell, 2013, p. 186). Data analysis debriefing sessions were conducted between the researchers to reduce bias (Guba, 1981). Credibility was established through peer examination of the data and use of direct participant quotes; trustworthiness measures included inter-rater comparisons and audit trails; transferability was accomplished through rich details of the context and situation; and confirmability was achieved with peer review and use of NVivo to analyze data (Ary et al., 2006; Guba, 1981). These evaluation criteria were implemented and applied to produce a reliable and valid qualitative research study.

Findings

Of the students who participated in the study away experience, 10 had never been to Washington, D.C. while the other 12 had been for class trips, work, vacation, or conferences.

Research Question 1: What were students' expectations regarding the study away experience in Washington, D.C.?

The analysis of students' open-ended responses on the pre-questionnaire indicated three major themes for their expectations of the study away experience: 1) Gain a new perspective on agriculture, 2) Expand personal and professional networks, and 3) Have an enjoyable experience.

Gain a new perspective on agriculture.

Students said they anticipated this trip would broaden their understanding of a variety of agricultural issues, policies, and organizations. Hillary said, "I think this trip will help to give the full spectrum of the industry and how it is affecting us at the grass-roots level." Students commented that they expected the study away experience would give them exposure to the specifics of agricultural policy and how those policies impact agriculture nationally. Jane said: "I want to

reach my goal of having ag policy literacy. Government and policy has [sic] always bored me, but it is so vital for every aspect of my life.” Richard said he hoped the trip would help him “broaden my perspective of agricultural policy and gain a better sense of my academic future.” Grace said one of her goals is “to become a more active proponent of the industry. I believe that seeing agricultural politics first-hand will help me attain this by broadening my understanding of agriculture’s stance in government and strengthening my personal ties.”

Students were reported being excited to visit the headquarters of many agricultural organizations to gain first-hand insight in how they operate. Laurie said the course would allow her to “gain more experience within the agriculture industry on how decisions are made and become more familiar with the agriculture organizations.” Robin also said she was eager to visit the agricultural organizations and how that experience could influence her future: “When on the trip, I hope to see that the officials within the organizations are sincere and truly care about the future of agriculture. I hope this experience will open my eyes to a mostly unfamiliar aspect of agriculture.”

To gain this new perspective on agriculture, students recognized that being in D.C. and visiting with agricultural organization representatives would provide them with opportunities for experiential learning. Sophia said: “Thus far, the extent of my dealings with agriculture practices/laws/and standards have been from the perspective of what is already in place. This will allow a better understanding of the background for why laws/standards are the way they are.” Students commented that they expected to see the topics they learn about in their collegiate classes actually in action while on this study away experience. Cara said, “I will finally be able to see the things I am taught being used in real life situations.” Patricia further emphasized this:

This experience will allow me to actually see for myself the concepts that I have been taught in my coursework. I am a visual learner, so I believe this trip will help me have a deeper understanding of what I have been lectured over in class. I also believe that talking to the ag businesses, lobbyists, etc. will help me gain understanding based on the face-to-face conversation I will be able to have.

Emma commented, “I believe a great deal of concepts that are taught in my coursework have been about promoting agriculture and this is a perfect way to learn about it and have a better understanding of it.” Kelly said: “We are taught a lot about the importance of communication in agriculture. I am hoping by meeting with the different organizations, we will be able to see hands on how the things we are taught come into play.” Robin also said she wanted to see how communication efforts are used in the organizations: “I believe this experience will take concepts I have been taught in ag comm courses and apply them to careers. I will be able to see the importance of the communications position within an organization rather than just being told.”

Expand personal and professional network.

Another emergent theme regarding students’ expectations was the desire to expand their personal and professional networks. Students said they anticipated learning from the students who attended from the partnering university. Kayla said she wanted to “come home with closer friends who I can connect with throughout my career as well as have a wider view of American agriculture.” Emma said she was looking forward to “connecting with other agriculturalists and finding out what the other side of agriculture is.”

Students also expected to network with professionals at the organizations they would visit. Hillary said she wanted “to network and talk with others about the direction the industry is going.” Jacob echoed this sentiment: “I hope to gain network contacts within my current organizations on a national level.” Katie said the study away experience sounded “like a good opportunity to meet some important people.” Several students mentioned that they expected the study away experience

would provide them with more insight for potential careers. Robin said, “I also hope for clarity within my future career choice,” and Patricia remarked, “I also hope to understand how I as a future communicator for the agricultural industry can make an impact and help make the best decisions for the future of the industry.”

Have an enjoyable experience.

The final emergent theme for students’ expectations was a general sense that the study away experience would be enjoyable. Many students were eager to visit D.C. for the first time or to go back now that they were older. Patricia said, “I wanted to be part of this experience because I have never been to Washington DC [sic] and this may be the only chance I ever have to go.” Grace commented she thought going to D.C. “would be fun, of course, but also that it would be very beneficial to travel with a class.” Several students mentioned that this may be their only opportunity to visit these agricultural organizations. Claire said, “I feel like it is going to be a laid back educational experience that won’t come around again for myself.” Sylvia noted the unique nature of the trip: “The opportunity was too good to pass up! The activities we have planned are once in a lifetime experiences, and I just couldn’t miss out.”

Research Question 2: What were students’ reflections upon completion of the study away experience in Washington, D.C.?

Coding of the post-trip open-ended questions revealed six emergent themes: 1) Appreciated gaining behind-the-scenes view of agricultural organizations, 2) Provided more insight into future career options, 3) Study away experience extends the classroom, 4) Study away was an “eye-opening” experience, 5) Advocating for agriculture is a shared national effort, and 6) Enjoyed being in D.C.

Appreciated gaining behind-the-scenes view of agricultural organizations.

The primary purpose of this study away experience was to meet with representatives of a variety of agricultural organizations. Students commented that these visits were some of the most interesting aspects of their time in D.C. Students recognized that they were able to gain a better understanding of how these organizations work and the first-hand exposure clarified what the organizations do. Grace said, “It was incredible to be able to visit organizations and learn what they each do. Most of us have heard the names, and we know that they are supporters of agriculture, but they seem so far removed.” Emily said she enjoyed “being able to gain a deeper understanding of the organizations involved in agriculture and how they operate at a national and even international level.” Timothy said: “I must say that the most interesting aspect of the experience was our visits with the commodity groups. I found their jobs interesting, especially our visit with US Wheat since they were in crisis mode.” Robin shared:

I enjoyed seeing the behind the scenes people. I followed a lot of the organizations we met with on twitter [sic] and see all of the blogs and messages they post. On this trip I was able to see who they were and that they really care about agriculture and getting the facts to the people. I also enjoyed meeting with the organizations that you see often but really never know what they do.

Many students said they did not realize how much the organizations really do. John said, “I enjoyed meeting the people behind the organizations that I hear about on the news, and learning about the organizations I didn’t know about, and all they do for the agricultural industry.” Students said getting to listen to several organizations discuss agricultural issues gave them a broader understanding of the topic. Hillary said, “I think it was most interesting to have the opportunity to

hear several industry perspectives on the same topic (i.e. AFBF, US Grains Council and NCBA's view of the Farm Bill)." Kelly shared a similar comment, "I am satisfied with what I learned because I felt that we got an in depth knowledge of government within agriculture, but from several different views...we truly got an idea of how things go from beginning to end."

Students also said they gained a different perspective of what lobbying meant and its significant role in agricultural policy. Laurie said, "I didn't know so many organizations were based in Washington, D.C. or had a presence there, where lobbying is a big part of business operation." John said: "I understand better what these organizations do, more than just the big bad term 'lobbying'. I understood that lobbying was a good thing, but the national level was a little different story and how they operate."

Provided more insight into future career options.

After visiting with organization representatives, several students said they now had a better idea of what they might want to do in a future career. Cara said, "I wasn't completely sure what I wanted to do with my life before this trip, but now I know I want to work for farmer co-operatives. I am certain that I don't want to be in lobbying." The study away experience reaffirmed many students' goals for the future. Timothy commented: "I think the overall experience solidified my desire to be in the agricultural industry. Before going my career plans were pretty open, but now I feel more certain about my decision to enter agriculture." Kayla said, "This further drove my current goal of wanting to go to law school." Patricia said she had considered applying for an internship in D.C. but wasn't sure if she should before attending the study away experience. She said, "After actually being in D.C. and seeing how many students go on to work full time after their internships, I realized that I must not miss out on the opportunity to intern there." Grace said:

This has strengthened my want to be an advocate for the agriculture industry, but it has also given me the idea that I truly think I would prefer to implement agricultural relations on a more localized level. I appreciate and respect all the work that these organizations do, and I could see myself working for one of them one day, but hopefully in a more rural area where I can bring new communications strategies to audiences that are less familiar with them.

Several students were already involved with the organizations they visited during the study away at a local or state level. Getting to go to the national headquarters seemed to further strengthen their desire to remain involved. Jacob said, "I want to become more active with advocacy and become even more involved in the organizations which I am a member of such as Farm Bureau, NCBA and CHS." John commented:

I am a member of Farm Bureau and will always be, but this trip has made me think of how I want to be involved within organizations like Farm Bureau. Be on a local coop board, state committee on something, be a producer that goes testifies on bills when I need to. And also knowing that its people like me and my fellow classmates that are doing these jobs with everyone we met with in DC, that's us in 2-5 years.

Students also said being in D.C. made them realize they might want to work there. Kayla said, "I decided that if the opportunity arises, I would move to DC and work on Capitol Hill, or as a lobbyist." Timothy shared, "The idea of working in DC has always been floating around in my mind, now I really want to pursue this." Hillary said:

This experience will impact me in the future because I have gained a lot of information about the orgs I could potentially work for. From a social and professional perspective, I think it helped me to network. I got a business card from every organization, I have connected with these people on LinkedIn, and I plan to further my professional network with these contacts. I set a goal to apply for positions in D.C.

Study away experience extends the classroom.

Overall, students recognized that the study away experience was a unique learning opportunity. For example, Hillary said, "I think the education we got in D.C. was one that we could not have gotten in a classroom." Michelle said the experience showed her "that beyond the classroom the skills that we learn are relevant and useful for potential job opportunities." Timothy commented, "The experience certainly illuminated the real world applications of the numerous topics which were presented in my undergraduate and graduate experiences." Kelly said: "We are always taught that what we learn in the classroom can be real life. I learned that most of what I learn can really help me in a career."

Other students mentioned specific classes that were beneficial to what they heard in D.C. Linda said, "I could see lots of things from my leadership courses tying in and being very important in advancement in the workplace." Tracy commented: "I realized just how important my economics classes were. I wish I could understand econ better than I do because it is a huge, huge, huge part of our government." Kayla said, "I found it beneficial when the organizations would discuss the recession or the Dodd-Frank act because I have done so much work with those topics in econ classes. It was interesting to see how the recession affected these organizations first hand." Richard noted that being able to visit with lobbyists and policy makers gave him a better sense of agricultural policy. He said: "This trip transformed agricultural policy from something that seemed complicated and unapproachable to a process that I could participate in the future. I have a completely new perspective on politics after my experience in DC."

Many of the students were majoring in agricultural communications and were able to make connections of what they heard during the organization visits to their coursework. Robin said she "was amazed by the importance of the knowledge of news writing and blog writing and social media. I now see all of the possibilities within my major and what I am learning." Cara said she appreciated being "able to see communications efforts in real life rather than just hearing about them in the classroom." Claire said, "Targeting your audience is something that every single organization has to do on a daily basis and we thoroughly learn about audience segmentation." Grace said:

While we have discussed, studied, investigated, and analyzed the communications practices of many agricultural organizations in so many of my classes, visiting these organizations and speaking with the people heading up these practices was such an insightful experience. They were able to explain why they use the methods they use, and the mission behind their communications practices.

Sylvia also made connections to her coursework, "At the U.S. Wheat Associates, I very much enjoyed learning about their crisis communication plans, and their monitoring techniques of social media...it was exciting to see that the concepts we discussed in class being applied."

Study away was an "eye-opening" experience.

For many students, getting to travel to D.C. and visit with many organizations was an experience that gave them a broader perspective on agriculture. Grace said: "I believe this experience has opened my eyes to the level of agriculture in the federal government. It is not the

‘small town’ industry that it so often appears to be – it impacts everyone, and legislators know that.” Laurie commented: “I did not know there were so many organizations against animal agriculture and that people were not satisfied in hearing that agriculture provides them with food for life. They want more, they want a story to go with it.”

Several students commented that this experience gave them exposure to a different aspect of agriculture. Kayla said: “I loved seeing the political side of Ag. That’s something we don’t see much of in [state] so it was great to see something different.” Emma said she enjoyed “meeting the ‘other side’ of agriculture and putting faces with that other side. This experience allowed myself and others to see something that was completely different from [state] Agriculture.”

For some students, leaving their comfort zone pushed their own perceptions of what they knew. Hillary said: “I think the trip made me more open-minded. I was not sure about re-visiting D.C. However, now I would consider working there, if given the opportunity.” Kayla said, “In [state] we are very sheltered and conservative. I think it was good for us to get out and experience something different. It was a huge culture shock for many but I think it’s a shock everyone needs to experience.

Advocating for agriculture is a shared national effort.

After visiting with the organizations, students said they realized advocating for agriculture is happening on an individual and organization level. Students said they appreciated knowing that the agricultural industry has support at the national level. Jacob said, “It was great to see some large Ag Advocacy groups out there petitioning and defending the nation’s most important industry.” Emily commented she “gained an overall deeper understanding of how agriculture is supported at a national level.” Sylvia said, “The most interesting aspect of the trip for me was learning more about ‘ag’vocracy at a level where actions and decisions directly influence the lives of our nation’s agriculturalists.” John said, “I have more faith in the people working for the agriculture industry in DC, I understand it’s a tough battle, but meeting them made me have a better belief in the future of ag.” Robin commented:

The experience changed my beliefs in the sense that though these men and women in DC didn’t grow up on a farm or directly in agriculture, they still fight for the small town farmers and ranchers. I saw the passion for agriculture within them, and know that though they may have never worked in the dirt, they want to see agriculture thrive just as I do.

Many of the students commented that this experience made them proud to be in the agricultural industry. Emma said, “It strengthened my beliefs and values in American agriculture and the American way of life.” This experience made several say they are more passionate about representing the agricultural industry. Grace said, “I also feel I have been strengthened as an agriculturalist. I left these organizations feeling a sense of pride in the field I have chosen, and a want to promote the positive word of agriculture.” Sylvia specifically mentioned how significant this experience was for her:

The experience re-energized my passion for agriculture. School is difficult and it is easy to lose sight of what drives your decisions as a student. Recently, I found myself not really enjoying anything I am involved with anymore, but found after this trip I am refocused on what my love and passion is, which is agriculture. Through this experience, my voice and point of view as an agricultural communicator is forever changed for the better.

Michelle said what she learned during the experience influenced her goals “to be willing to learn all I need to, to be well equipped as an advocate of agriculture and communicate it properly.” On the other hand, Kelly said, “I learned I do not have enough passion for any specific aspect of agriculture to be a lobbyist for their organization. You could tell that each one of the individuals really had a passion for what they were working for.”

Enjoyed being in D.C.

Although students said they learned a great deal from visiting with agricultural organization representatives, they also commented on how much they enjoyed being in Washington, D.C. Overall, students enjoyed the variety of activities and attractions in D.C. Michelle said, “This was my first time to Washington D.C. so I liked seeing the whole city and everything it had to offer.” For many, getting to visit the nation’s capital helped them gain a stronger sense of patriotism. Emily said, “This experience greatly influenced my values and beliefs. I now have a much greater appreciation and understanding of the depth of those who have fought for our country...gave me more drive to get my equine therapy program running for veterans.” Grace said:

I feel I have been strengthened as a patriot. It may sound a little cheesy, but since I have returned from the trip, I have told everyone I know to make every effort to visit Washington, D.C. Every U.S. citizen should have the opportunity to see where our nation as we know it really began. To read about it and see pictures and postcards is one thing, but to see and experience the city in-person is truly incredible.

Several students specifically mentioned the significance of visiting historical sites. Richard said, “Getting to see national landmarks and museums added historical depth to the experience.” Linda said “getting to see the history first hand” was something she enjoyed. Tracy said, “I really liked that we were in DC on Memorial Day. Being in Arlington on that day was really awesome.” Patricia said, “For me, the most interesting aspect of the trip was being in Arlington National Cemetery on Memorial Day. It was an amazing experience.”

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

As NASULGC (2000) pointed out, higher education needs to prepare students who can think critically about economic, political, and societal factors that will influence future actions. Study abroad can provide these opportunities (Bobbitt & Akers, 2012), but not all college students will be able to participate in these experiences. In these cases, domestic study away experiences can still provide students with opportunities to broaden their understanding and perception of the world (Sobania & Braskcamp, 2009). For those college students who cannot study abroad due to financial or time limitations, visiting Washington, D.C. provides an experiential opportunity to learn more about our nation’s capital and how many decisions that impact agriculture nationally and internationally are made. This study attempted to assess the experiential learning opportunity of a study away course to Washington, D.C.

An analysis of the students’ pre-trip expectations for the study away experience revealed three major themes: To gain a new perspective on agriculture, expand personal and professional networks, and have an enjoyable experience. Students stated they expected to learn more about the agricultural organizations they would visit and the issues those organizations address. They also said they looked forward to meeting students from the partnering university and representatives from the organizations. Finally, they were excited to visit Washington, D.C. for either the first time or again in a different context.

A comparison of students' expectations before the trip and their reflections after demonstrated they gained more from the experience than anticipated. The reflections provided rich details and thorough explanations of what they learned during the study away experience. Analysis of their reflections revealed six emergent themes: Appreciated gaining behind-the-scenes view of agricultural organizations; Provided more insight into future career options; Study away experience extends the classroom; Study away was an "eye-opening" experience; Advocating for agriculture is a shared national effort; and Enjoyed being in D.C. These themes are similar to what other researchers have identified as benefits of out-of-class learning experience – critical thinking, leadership skills, and personal development (Kuh, 1995; Seidman & Brown, 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996). Students valued the opportunity to have first-hand exposure to organizations and discuss current agricultural issues. This allowed them to think more critically about agricultural topics from a variety of perspectives, which is an important skill for them to possess (Morgan, 2013; Sprecker & Rudd, 1997). By hearing differing organizational approaches to an issue, students were able to see and interact with agricultural problems in a realistic setting, thereby increasing their ability to analyze decision making processes.

Bobbitt and Akers (2012) found that study abroad programs helped agricultural science and natural resource students broaden their academic experience. Within agricultural communications, Northfell and Edgar (2014) reported that international programs provide students with unique opportunities to learn communication skills in real-world settings. These benefits of study abroad experiences can also be achieved in well-designed domestic study away opportunities. Students in the current study were able to connect concepts from prior courses to what they learned during the study away experience. The concrete experience of meeting with organization representatives clarified the lessons and allowed for personal application (Kolb, 1984). Zilbert and Leske (1989) said the reflective observation component of Kolb's model allows students to critically examine a concrete experience. Students demonstrated through the post-trip responses to open-ended questions that they thought critically about what they learned at each organization visit. During the abstract conceptualization stage (Kolb, 1984), students were able to make generalizations based on what they learned during the experience. Students commented that the visits helped them realize what they were learning in college could be applied in a future career. Many even said the study away experience helped them narrow in on what it is they want to do.

Visiting D.C. helped to build students' self-confidence and their world view related to living in a large city with diverse and varying viewpoints. Sobania and Braskamp (2009) stated that domestic experiences can provide students opportunities to "open their minds, hearts, and behaviors to difference" (p. 24). Several commented on how the experience exposed them to broader and different perspectives of agriculture, specifically on the political, business, and activist sides. Students realized that advocating for agriculture is a national initiative practiced by all to defend "the nation's most important industry" and lobbying influences decisions that are made.

Just being able to visit the many historical attractions in Washington, D.C. was impactful. Students reflected on the stronger sense of patriotism gained by being in the nation's capital. The majority felt they gained a greater appreciation and understanding of the history of our country during the experience. All agreed that the added value of collaboration between two universities enhanced the experience. Overall, the students were satisfied with the collaborative study away experience and its educational benefits. They recognized the experience was a unique learning opportunity and made many real-world applications to what they learned in the traditional classroom.

While study away experiences are not a new concept (Kuh, 1993, 1995, 1996; Leggette et al., 2013; Sobania & Braskamp, 2009), this study demonstrates that faculty members can provide valuable active learning opportunities for students in a domestic setting. Several recommendations can be offered for educators to consider when planning these educational experiences. The students'

feedback provides valuable insight that can guide decisions when planning, organizing, and implementing study away experiences. To make the experience enjoyable, educators should strive to create a balance of social and educational activities. Students desired opportunities to broaden their overall understanding of agricultural issues, policies, organizations, and careers; therefore, a variety of experiences should be incorporated to increase exposure to governmental, public, and private institutions from both sides of agriculture. Organizational representatives must be strategically selected and prepared to offer advice and lead discussion on topics that connect with students' academic interests. In order for experiential learning to be meaningful, a daily reflection period should be built into the schedule to allow time for mental and emotional engagement in the recent experience (Kolb, 1984; Proudman, 1992). Reflective journaling can encourage students to make generalizations about the learning that can then be transferred and applied to their own lives (Petkus, 2000).

Additional research could be conducted with these students to determine how they were able to actively experiment with what they learned to transfer and apply the concepts to new situations (Kolb, 1984). Future research should also analyze students' perceptions of each agency visited and develop a quantitative instrument to measure change in knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions.

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About the Authors

Courtney Meyers is an associate professor in agricultural communications at Texas Tech University.

Shannon Arnold is an associate professor in agricultural education at Montana State University.