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Rural Colombian College Students' Motivations to Participate in an International Agricultural Internship

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Rural Colombian College Students' Motivations to Participate in an International Agricultural Internship

Abstract

This qualitative study explored rural students' motivations to participate in agricultural study abroad. Thirty-five undergraduate students (24 women and 11 men) applied to participate in a 6-month cohort internship program through the application form and statement of purpose. The analysis of this information allowed us to identify the motivations of rural students to apply to a cohort internship program that offer possibilities of international exchange at a large university in the U.S. Four motivational categories to participate in the study abroad were described (i.e., academic, personal, career, and community motivations). Practical implications are provided for government and university administrators and program coordinators with rural youth motivation information to help them plan their internationalization efforts for academic exchanges.

Keywords

Colombian youth, rural education, study abroad, student expectations, student motivation

Rural Colombian College Students' Motivations to Participate in an International Agricultural Internship

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Education is essential in developing and advancing national security (Mejia-Mejia, 2016) because it promotes economic growth, reduction of inequality, and citizen training (Gacel-Avila, 2022). Due to these factors, the internationalization of education in Latin America has acquired greater importance. The internationalization of education is demonstrated in different ways, including double degrees, international validation of degrees, bilingualism, participation in international teams, acceptance of distance courses, participation in international consortia, participation in global rankings, internationalization of the curriculum and academic mobility (OECD, 2012; Mineducacion, 2017). Higher education institutions play a fundamental role in the internationalization processes of developing countries by integrating students into knowledge networks and globalized environments; the goal is to enhance research and knowledge to raise the productivity levels and competitiveness of the new generations (Diaz-Guaecha et al., 2020).

Worldwide, international student mobility has been described as an excellent tool to promote multicultural education. Researchers published the benefits for students who participate in short-term international mobility. For example, Mendoza et al. (2022) concluded that student mobility promoted the comprehensive development of students, personal skills, cultural diversity, and tolerance of diversity. Ruth et al. (2019) found that studying abroad was associated with increased self-confidence, improved basic research skills, and heightened interpersonal and intercultural communication. Otero Gómez et al. (2018) affirmed that students who participated in mobility activities developed skills that, until then, they thought they did not have. Rampold et al. (2018) said international programs improved students' cultural competence. Moreover, Tarrant et al. (2014) concluded that international education fosters civic engagement, responsibility, and global awareness.

Academic mobility has been promoted in Colombia through different programs such as Colombia Científica, the Latin American Exchange program (PILA), and the Nexo Global program. These programs supported different activities for teachers and students, including short-term stays, academic semesters, and internships (ASCUN, 2022; Minciencias, 2022; Mineducacion, 2017). Nexo Global is an international internship program for undergraduate students with high academic performances from accredited educational programs. Data from the

Minciencias (2023) website indicated that the goal of approximately 6,000 participated in the Nexo Global program between 2015 and 2018, but no precise data was found. Findings about Colombian student development in the international program are limited, hindering decision-making and the construction of relevant policies (Acosta-Bohorquez, 2020).

In 2008, the project “Universidad en el Campo” was created, a proposal currently in force, developed by the Coffee Growers Committee and the Government of Caldas, with the support of three local universities, to promote and facilitate higher education access to the rural youth of the region of Caldas, specifically at the technical professional and technological levels through dual-credit programs (PROCASUR, 2014). The curricular plan is developed in grades 10 and 11 of high school, which allows students to achieve the necessary credits to obtain the title of technician when they finish grade 11 or to study one more year after finishing high school and to obtain the title of technologist (Universidad de Manizales, 2022). The Universidad en el campo project is based on the Escuela Nueva model, a pedagogical model that emerged in Colombia in the 1970s in response to the educational needs of primary school children in rural areas of the country.

The model is based on guides that address the different areas of knowledge so that children who already know how to read and write can have an autonomous learning route with a series of didactic activities from the perspective of "learning by doing," with activities according to the reality of students for example: cut, paste, investigate, question, interview, among others, in this context, the teacher acquires the role of facilitator of learning. Initially, the model was designed to respond to the high desertion rates in the countryside due to the agricultural activities that students carried out because they were young as part of the regional culture. This educational process also seeks for parents to be more participatory in educational methods; for this, the guides have activities and consultation exercises for parents, the community, and the ancestors with the sole purpose of recovering their knowledge and integrating them into the process of learning children (Parra & Knobloch, 2014)

In 2018, the Department of Caldas and the University of Caldas started a program aimed exclusively at rural high school students who participated in dual credit programs (Universidad en el Campo) and called it the Nexo Global Rural (NGR) program. NGR was developed to close the educational gap in student academic outcomes between urban and rural areas by linking agriculture and education (Parra et al., 2020). In Colombia, rural youth are not traditionally considered to participate in these programs because socioeconomic and cultural factors of rural communities limits access for youth. For the first time in Colombia, the NGR program provided opportunities for rural college students to engage in six-month study abroad in the U.S. to strengthen agricultural education in rural

areas and address the need to train professionals with skills to adapt to a changing world. Because of this new opportunity, this study addressed motivational factors of the rural youth students from a central area of Colombia (i.e. Caldas Department) to participate in a six-month cohort study abroad program.

Theoretical Framework

Situated expectancy-value motivation (SEVT), previously known as motivation theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020), served as conceptual and theoretical framework. This theory was chosen because Eccles and Wigfield's (2020) model of SEVT identifies factors that may influence students' choices to participate in different activities. Expectancies and task-value motivation can describe students' motivations to participate in educational activities. For this reason, much of the modern EVT applications have been in educational research. Some researchers have discussed expectancy-value theory in the context of education to: (1) explore the motivational beliefs that affect the students' behaviors (Xu, 2022); (2) identify expectancy beliefs and values of high school students to participate in STEM majors (Fong et al., 2021); (3) describe student motivation in physical education (Shang et al., 2022) and learning a second language (Nguyen & Habók, 2021); and, (4) identify agricultural students' motivations to study abroad (Raczkoski et al., 2018; Yue & Lu, 2022). Studies focused on student motivation using EVT in the Colombian context: (1) explored the motivations of Colombian college students to learn English (Barrero, 2021); (2) identified motivations of first-semester undergraduates to enroll in academic activities (Torres-Vargas et al., 2022); and (3) described gender beliefs regarding physical education (Cárcamo, 2020). No studies were found that studied rural Colombian students' motivation to participate in study abroad using the situated expectancy-value theory.

Purpose & Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore rural Colombian students' motivations to participate in six-month agricultural study-abroad cohort internships. The following research questions guided this study:

- (1) What were the characteristics of the students who applied and participated in the program?
- (2) What were the rural students' motivations to apply to an agricultural study-abroad program?
- (3) What were the students' expectations before participating in agricultural study-abroad?

Methods & Procedures

This exploratory study described Colombian students' motivation to participate in a 6-month agricultural study-abroad cohort internship at a large land-

grant university in the U.S. A descriptive study design was chosen because there was no comparison group to do a causal study. The nature of the data were self-reported based on students' expectations and task values. Students who were currently enrolled or had participated in a dual-credit program in an agricultural sciences department at a public university in rural Colombia were eligible to participate in the program. This pool of eligible participants was approximately 200 students. A three-step process was used to recruit participants for the NRG internship and study.

The first step was to open a call to all students from dual-credit programs or alumni who will continue in agricultural programs to participate in an English proficiency course. During this English course, the characteristics and details of the program were explained to the students. They were informed that a federally funded grant program would support participants with financial resources. The grant would pay for all the expenses from the English course (in person or virtual), documentation (passport, visa, and insurance), travel costs (air tickets, transportation, lodging, stipend), and resources for other expenses such as winter clothing. The selection criteria for the students were to: (1) be registered in a dual-credit course or have finished and continued in the agricultural program in Caldas department; (2) have completed 70% or more of the academic credits; (3) have a cumulative grade point average of 3.8 out of 5.0; (4) have built or developed a productive project during the dual-credit program; (5) lived in any of the municipalities of the department of Caldas; and, (6) obtained a B1 English proficiency level or higher, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

The second step was an open call to participate in the NRG program. In total, 35 students responded to the call and submitted the application, the statement of purpose, and the necessary support. The third step was the selection of students who met the requirements to participate in the NRG program. The applications were evaluated by a committee composed of entities participating in the project (Government and University). In total, 23 students were selected to participated in this program.

Data Sources

The application, statement of purpose, and pre- and post-study-abroad questionnaires served as data sources for the study. The application gathered information about contact details, students' resumes, and academic performance. Additionally, the statement of purpose communicated participants' motivation to participate in an international internship, potential impacts on their personal and professional development, anticipated benefits for their agricultural entrepreneurship project and for their communities where they lived in Colombia. Finally, a 10-item questionnaire was administered to students before they started

the internship. Four items measured personal expectations and six items measured academic expectations. A 4-point Likert scale was used: (1) I am sure it will not happen/ it didn't happen; (2) It's hard to happen; (3) It will probably happen/happened; (4) I'm sure it will happen/happened. Post-hoc Cronbach alpha coefficients were computed (personal expectations = .82; academic expectations = .71).

Data Analysis

The analysis of the statement of purpose was primarily inductive and sought to identify students' motivations and narratives that reflected the motivation of the group of students who applied to the program and the students that participated in the study abroad. In vivo coding was used in this study with youth because it identified aspects inherent in the students' experiences (Saldaña, 2016) and allowed participants' narratives to represent their motivations. The statements of purpose were loaded in Spanish to Atlas.ti software (Scientific Software Development GmbH, Version 22.1.0, 2022) to code the data. The coding process followed the recommendations of Saldaña (2016) and started with one participant's data first. The process was performed in four steps. First, for data layout, the information was organized, read, and the first codes were assigned. Second, for pre-coding, motivational concepts were sought in the codes. Third, for coding, the concepts of motivation were codified, focused on research questions. Once the coding of the first participant was finished, we continued coding individuals' data sources, until all the participants were completed. This method helped to contrast the information collected and increased the possibility of finding important concepts for subsequent analysis. The fourth step was from codes to categories. For the elaboration of categories, we used a deductive-inductive process (Vives Varela & Hamui, 2021), which consisted of starting from the theoretical framework, and later concepts were extracted from the data to consolidate into similar topic categories for the analysis. Finally, codes and categories were translated into English and descriptive statistics were computed to answer the research questions.

Findings

Regarding the first research question, characteristics of the students who applied and participated in the program were described. Twenty-four (68.6%) participants were female, and 11 students were male (31.4%). Regarding residence, 29 (82.9%) were born in Caldas (i.e., capital city). Further, 19 (54.3%) lived in the municipalities in the center of the Caldas Department close to the capital city, and 31.4% lived in the municipalities furthest from the capital of Caldas Department (Manizales), which was located more than 4 hours (100 km) by ground transportation toward the east of Caldas ($n = 11$). Next, 14.3% lived in municipalities located between one to four hours and approximately 50 to 100 km

by ground transportation toward the west of the Department ($n = 5$). Regarding the academic program that the students had taken in the dual-credit program, the most frequent response was the technologist in the management of agricultural projects ($n = 21$; 60%). Regarding entrepreneurship projects, only one student reported not having designed an entrepreneurship project within the dual-credit program (Table 1). The group of applicants (i.e., participants) in this study were rural college students from peasant families, mainly dedicated to agricultural production, mainly coffee, young rural workers, or those who have migrated to the municipal capitals looking for opportunities.

Table 1

Demographics of Student Program Participants (N = 35)

Characteristics	f(x)	%
<u>Sex</u>		
Female	24	68.6
Male	11	31.4
<u>Place of birth</u>		
Caldas Department	29	82.9
Other Departments	6	17.1
<u>Place of resident</u>		
West of Caldas	11	31.4
Center of Caldas	19	54.3
East of Caldas	5	14.3
<u>Academic program</u>		
Technology in Management of Agricultural Projects	21	60.0
Technology in Quality Assurance for Ag. Industry	6	17.0
Technology in Management of the Coffee Farm	3	8.6
Technology in Animal Production	3	8.6
Technology in Tourism Business Management	1	2.9
Technology in Environmental Management	1	2.9
<u>Did you design an agricultural entrepreneurship project during the Ucampo program?</u>		
Yes	34	97.1
No	1	2.9
<u>What is the topic of the project?</u>		
Coffee production	12	34.2
Agricultural production (different to coffee)	11	31.4
Animal production	9	25.7
Food production	1	2.9

Merchandising	1	2.9
None	1	2.9
<u>What is the area of interest?</u>		
Agricultural production	20	57.1
Animal production	8	22.9
Postharvest	7	20.0

Regarding the second research question, rural college students' motivations to apply to an agricultural study-abroad program were described. To identify the motivations of rural students to apply to an agricultural study abroad, we analyzed the statement of purpose written by 35 students who applied to the program (see Table 2). From the group of applicants, 23 students who met the program requirements were selected to travel to the university in the U.S. The coding of the students' statement of purpose is shown in Table 2. Grounded means the number of times each specific code was mentioned within each group.

The process of elaboration of categories was the result of SEVT and consolidated data. This allowed us to infer four categories. First, *academic motivation* included information about the students' interests in acquiring knowledge, having experience at a high-quality university, or fulfilling an academic requirement such as a degree thesis. Second, *career motivation* was defined as individual characteristics associated with the factors affecting career decisions: income, experience, risk, and other decisive elements of upward social mobility. Third, *personal motivation* was an individual's internal wants to satisfy and fulfill particular demands that serve as their source of personal drive. Fourth, *community motivation* was based on social needs, behaviors, and desires associated with fulfilling, upon return, a role in their communities, taking as a starting point that the training received converts them, in one way or another, into actors with a greater capacity to contribute to the solution of community problems, including those of agro-productive nature, daily faced in their places of origin.

Based on the number of times the codes were applied in the statement of purpose, we inferred that the *academic category* was an important motivation ($G = 77$). The code mostly applied in the review of the statement of purpose was knowledge (33 times). This code referred to situations where the applicants indicated that searching for new knowledge was a way to achieve progress in their projects, families, or communities. To support the above, Student 7 shared a quote demonstrating the motivation to acquire new knowledge despite juggling accessing education in rural areas and creating agricultural entrepreneurship, "*The study-abroad will help me acquire knowledge in the agricultural field, giving me the necessary tools to improve my productive project and the environment that surrounds me.*"

The search for knowledge was one of the strongest motivations of rural youth, especially learning that allows them to find solutions to the problems of their farms, increase productivity, or increase income. Student 8 explained, *“One problem in our farm and the farmers' farms in the area is the amount of waste generated by the production of coffee, such as pulp, shells, and leachate.”* Student 8 connected this problem to the internship by sharing, *“During the research internship, I will focus on learning about management methods and using these subproducts.”*

These quotes reported by students 7 and 8 were examples of the motivation for new knowledge they could acquire while studying abroad. This finding supported what Cortés (2020) expressed about the recognition of rural youth of the conditions of their environment and how it motivated them to seek access to education to contribute to constructing a better future for their family and community.

The *career motivation category* ($G = 51$) was the second motivation in several codes applied. Career goal was the most common code in this category (mentioned 19 times). This code referred to aspects such as purposes or goals the applicants' students wanted to achieve in pursuing their careers. The students shared different expectations about the benefits of the study abroad in their careers. For example, student 10 explained, *“Nexo Global program offers the great opportunity to carry out an internship that will undoubtedly allow us to live a very significant experience that will be reflected in work performance.”* Rural youth, in addition to individual aspirations, also have collective aspirations linked to transforming their territories. The students saw education and the possibility of an international internship as motivation to consolidate their aspirations. Student 19 commented participating in the study abroad would help them develop leadership and advance their passion for the environment:

The possibility of doing an internship abroad is a personal and professional challenge that in the medium and long-term will allow me to help consolidate myself as a visible leader not only in my region but in the entire department, promoting agricultural initiatives that encourage the proper use of the earth and the various resources we have.

The *personal motivation category* ($G = 44$) was the third motivation and personal goal was the most common code (21 times). The personal goal code refers to aspects such as purposes the applicants proposed to achieve during their life, such as improving family conditions, personal growth, and knowing other cultures and others. Throughout this study, we read and observed many stories about the purposes of the applicants to achieve during their life, and how this study abroad opportunity supports their goals. For instance, student 12 wrote:

Here begins a dream; I am one step away from fulfilling one of my most important dreams, for which I have prepared myself for 23 years with the help of my parents and my little sister, Nexo Global program, I want to be part of this dream, Traveling is evolving, and I am passionate about change.

Finally, the *community motivation category* ($G = 39$) was the fourth motivation identified. Supporting my community was the most common code in this category (21 times). This code referred to aspects such as supporting their community. Students continually express themselves in the statement of purpose and their motivation to support their communities. For instance, Student 20 commented:

My main purpose from a very young age is to be able to contribute to my community. That's why I chose to go to school and train myself, and now apply to the program always encouraged by my mother and motivated to set an example for my brother and friends.

Table 2

College Students' Motivations to Apply ($n = 35$) & Participate ($n = 23$) in NGR

Motivational Categories	Codes & (G)	Brief description
Academic Applicants $G = 77$	Knowledge (33)	Acquisition of new technical knowledge that supports academic and research activities
	Research (16)	Acquisition of new elements of research that support academic and other activities
	Destination university (14)	Aspects about the quality reputation and the graduates of the destination university
	English (9)	To learn English or second language
	Academic goal (3)	Objectives or purposes that are proposed to achieve during academic life.
	Thesis (2)	The requirement to obtain a college degree (thesis, seminar, internship)
Career	Career goal (19)	Objectives or purposes that are proposed to achieve during career life.

Applicants G = 51	Venture (18)	Factors influencing in their entrepreneurship project.
	Income (6)	Factors influencing to improve their income.
	Employment (4)	Factors that generate new employment opportunities or improve current employment.
	Experience (4)	Factors that generate new experiences
Personal	Personal goal (21)	Objectives or purposes that are proposed to achieve during their life.
	Family (7)	Factors that improve the family conditions
Applicants G = 44	To know other cultures (5)	New cultural elements related to know other countries.
	Personal growth (4)	Factors influencing their personal growth
	My dream (4)	Purposes that are proposed to achieve during life.
	Family business (3)	Factors that improve the family business
Community Applicants G = 39	Support my community (21)	Your main social assignment is to provide instruction or other support services to any of the farmers in your community.
	Example (5)	The students want to be an example for the whole community
	Quality life (7)	Your main goal is to search for alternatives to prove the quality of life in their communities.
	Searching solutions (4)	Your main goal is to search solutions to different agricultural problems in their communities.
	Production cost (2)	Your main goal is to search alternatives to reduce the production cost in their projects and communities

Note. G = Grounded: times a code has been applied

Regarding the third research question, we described students' expectations before they participated in the study-abroad internship. To identify the expectations of the 23 rural students who met the program requirements we used a four-point Likert scale to determine their expectations before the internship. The items were

grouped into two variables: academic and personal expectations. Table 3 shows the frequencies of the students' expectations.

Table 3

Student Expectations before Participating in an Agricultural Study Abroad

Expectations	Item	Mean	SD
Personal Pretest <i>M</i> = 3.67 <i>SD</i> = 0.51	I will develop communication skills.	3.78	.42
	I will develop interpersonal skills.	3.70	.47
	I will develop problem-solving abilities.	3.65	.71
	I will develop self-confidence.	3.44	.72
Academic Pretest <i>M</i> = 3.47 <i>SD</i> = 0.57	It will help me in my academic program.	3.87	.34
	I will have new opportunities in Colombia.	3.57	.50
	I will get relevant knowledge for my project.	3.48	.51
	I will improve future possibilities.	3.44	.59
	I will learn valuable skills that are difficult to learn in Colombia.	3.17	.88
	It will help me decide to continue studying or working.	3.00	.95

Note. Likert scale: 1 = I am sure it will not happen/ it didn't happen, 2 = It's hard to happen, 3 = It will probably happen/happened, 4 = I'm sure it will happen/happened

Conclusions

The researchers explored the rural students' motivations to participate in an agricultural study-abroad program. Each conclusion was discussed regarding its contributions to the knowledge base and implications. First, academic motivations were the most frequently mentioned by the rural Colombian college students to participate in a 6-month international study-abroad internship. Acquiring new technical knowledge was most commonly mentioned by participants regarding their academic motivations. The acquisition of skills entails sustained effort; thus, college students reported the international experience was a means to motivate them for success. Motivation plays a determining role in the success of any activity (Wang & Xue, 2022). The EVT model emphasizes the importance of students'

motivations and how they affect their academic goals (Wigfield & Eccles, 1992; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

This exploratory study showed two motivational categories, including academic and personal motivations, as the most frequently mentioned for rural Colombian students when expressing interest in participating in study abroad. These results were aligned with those found by Fernandez-Robin et al. (2016), who evaluated the exchange motivations of university students and identified seven motivational factors (i.e., live new experiences, expand your network of contacts, influence other people, work reasons, self-realization, tourism, and academic reasons). Hercog and Van de Laar (2016) evaluated the motivations of moving abroad for Hindu students and found that one of the motivations for going abroad was the perceived improvement in career prospects and status that comes with studying abroad. Other researchers, such as Ruth et al. (2019), found that international internships improved students' academic performance, increased interest in further study, and broadened their worldview. Further, the most important motivation of Canadian students to participate in study abroad was related to educational and learning factors such as improving skills and a second language (Wintre et al., 2015).

Finally, the results from this study provided useful information to improve the internationalization of rural education in Colombia because it contributes to a discussion that has been on-going for several years, and how rural education can be strengthened based on the motivations and expectations of rural youth regarding their future and their communities. It is essential that educational institutions, cooperation agencies, government entities, and partners who work or develop projects to impact young people, especially rural youth, consider the need to link social culture, motivations, and expectations of young people when designing study abroad programs to help college students develop human, social and cultural capital.

Implications

Regarding the implications for educational policies, the Colombia government should promote the link between rural education (high school) and institutions of higher education for several reasons: (1) improve the quality of rural education; (2) increase access to higher education to the youth of the region; (3) leverage youth motivation and the expectancies to study; and (4) increase participants to benefit from education. At the same time, undergraduate programs in universities should involve international context in their curricula, invite professors and researchers to share their academic experiences with the students, and guide and motivate students to engage in international experiences.

The researchers of this study wanted to generate a first approach to identify motivations of rural students from the District of Caldas in Colombia to participate

in an international agricultural internship. Students' motivation to participate in agricultural study-abroad relies on many factors of the environment where they study, their family, and their community. The findings of this study highlighted the host institution that offered the program and participants' academic motivations as being important for the rural youth participating in this internship. Academic motivations suggest that if rural youth had more access to undergraduate programs that promote higher education, they could improve the educational level of rural areas and develop local research that seeks to solve problems and promote entrepreneurship. Universities, local government, private companies, and central government should create and maintain academic programs in rural areas with academic quality to enhance student motivation to participate in study-abroad cohort programs. Finally, the findings of this research may be helpful for policymakers in the education office in the government of Caldas, Ministry of Science of Colombia, and Ministry of Education of Colombia to continue to support and promote programs such as the Nexo Rural program to provide new alternatives for students to develop entrepreneurship in agricultural and rural contexts.

Recommendations

Regarding future studies, we recommend that the base of students participating in the program be expanded by studying other undergraduate programs in other rural regions of Colombia. Future studies should be conducted in different cultural and international contexts. For example, there may be differences in college students' motivation based on the type of higher education institution and community (urban vs. rural) that developed their personal, professional and academic experiences. Further, students' motivations and expectations are likely to be different based on their home countries and the host countries where they plan to study abroad. Language proficiency should also be considered in future studies as this plays a major role in how people interact and interpret experiences in host countries. Moreover, we recommend a data collection instrument or protocol includes the family as a motivational factor because one's family can positively or negatively affect the decision of rural youth to participate in this type of program. Finally, we recommend further research on how applicants' motivations and expectations informed their study abroad experiences and how these findings can help select future participants for study abroad programs.

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