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Going the Distance: Examining the Impact of a Long-Term International Fellowship

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Abstract

AgriCorps, an American organization, created a fellowship program to connect agricultural professionals to school-based agricultural education in developing countries. Previous scholars researched the impacts of international experiences on learners, usually through the lens of short-term study abroad. This study seeks to examine the impact of long-term international fellowship experiences in education and provide recommendations for future like-programs by analyzing the experiences of previous AgriCorps fellows. Fellows lived and taught school-based agricultural education in a community in Ghana or Liberia. Eighteen previous AgriCorps fellows participated in a semi-structured interview through a virtual meeting platform. The interviews were used to collect data on fellows' experiences and perceptions. Through our analysis, 12 themes and 64 sub themes emerged. The initial themes include 1) growth after fellowship, 2) thoughts on AgriCorps post experience, 3) challenges, 4) AgriCorps responsibility, 5) discrimination, 6) enjoyed the culture, 7) reflection, 8) developed development philosophy, 9) adjusting to fellowship life, 10) engaging community, 11), language and 12) relationships built. With recommendations to provide language training, have established protocols for sexual harassment and health emergencies, ensure access to mental health and reflection resources, and assist participants in adapting back into home country culture.

Keywords

Experiential learning, Africa, education, development, agriculture

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Abstract

AgriCorps, an American organization, created a fellowship program to connect agricultural professionals to school-based agricultural education in developing countries. Previous scholars researched the impacts of international experiences on learners, usually through the lens of short-term study abroad. This study seeks to examine the impact of long-term international fellowship experiences in education and provide recommendations for future like-programs by analyzing the experiences of previous AgriCorps fellows. Fellows lived and taught school-based agricultural education in a community in Ghana or Liberia. Eighteen previous AgriCorps fellows participated in a semi-structured interview through a virtual meeting platform. The interviews were used to collect data on fellows' experiences and perceptions. Through our analysis, 12 themes and 64 sub themes emerged. The initial themes include 1) growth after fellowship, 2) thoughts on AgriCorps post experience, 3) challenges, 4) AgriCorps responsibility, 5) discrimination, 6) enjoyed the culture, 7) reflection, 8) developed development philosophy, 9) adjusting to fellowship life, 10) engaging community, 11), language and 12) relationships built. With recommendations to provide language training, have established protocols for sexual harassment and health emergencies, ensure access to mental health and reflection resources, and assist participants in adapting back into home country culture.

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Introduction

Agricultural education offers students the opportunity to explore topics in agriculture, food, and natural resources using experiential learning, classroom instruction, and leadership education (National Association of Agricultural Educators [NAAE], 2021). While agricultural education is prominent in the United States school systems, transferring the positive impact of agricultural education to other countries demonstrates great promise (Dadush, 2015; NAAE, 2021). On a global perspective, there is a dual need for increased quality of agricultural education for students (Alabi, 2016; Jjuuko et al., 2019; Twuamsi et al., 2019) and increased soft skill set of agricultural educators (Barrick et al., 2009; Foster et al., 2014; Goecker, 1992; Kabasa et al., 2015; Lindner et al., 2003; McCormick & Whittington, 2000; Talbert & Edwin, 2008). One suggested way to both increase soft skill development of agricultural educators while providing quality agricultural education is fellowship opportunities and international experiences (Serin, 2017; Wright, 2020).

AgriCorps previously hosted an American Fellowship program that utilized a comprehensive transformative system called school-based agricultural education (SBAE) in Ghana and Liberia (AgriCorps, 2021). Through AgriCorps, youth in Liberia and Ghana learned from fellows who served as agricultural educator, 4-H advisor, and agricultural extension agent. (AgriCorps, 2021). As the AgriCorps fellowship program has now transitioned to a separate program called the International Agricultural Education Fellowship Program, the aim is to better understand fellows' experiences and to make improvements on future fellowships and programs of the like, such as the Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program, Peace Corps, AmeriCorps teaching programs, and other international education fellowships. By improving the experiences for fellows, African youth will benefit through enhanced skill development that will prepare youth to be competitive in the job market or prepare for higher education.

International experiences provide learners with opportunities to undergo perspective changes, develop soft skills, learn new teaching practices, heighten their self-awareness, and be introduced to cultural differences (Czerwionka et al., 2015; Harder et al., 2012; Mnouer, 2020; O'Malley et al., 2019; Roberts & Edwards, 2018; Rubenstein et al., 2018; Vatalaro et al., 2015). Previous scholars researched impacts of international experiences through the lens of study abroad programs and demonstrate evidence of study abroad ability to increase student's personal growth, awareness, and intercultural competence (Byker & Putman, 2019; Rundstrom Williams, 2005; Soria & Troisi, 2013; Willard-Holt, 2001).

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Little research has been conducted on long-term international agricultural education fellowships, however, the primary research study this study models after is Wright (2020) who

conducted an analysis of AgriCorps fellows, and found several themes including perspective changes, personal growth, professional development, career changes, feelings of isolation, importance of relationships and cohorts. With Wright's (2020) study only including classes one and two, this study expanded to include all five classes.

Theoretical Framework

Exploring the experiences of AgriCorps fellows used a lens of Kolb's theory of experiential learning theoretical perspective. Influenced by John Dewey and Kurt Lewin, Kolb introduces the experiential learning model as a four-stage cycle (Kolb, 1976). The four stages a learner should experience include concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Essentially, the model describes that the learner takes the experience and translates it into concepts, then the concepts are used to guide their choices in future experiences (Kolb, 1976). It is predicted participants experienced the four stages through AgriCorps and use their learned concepts in their current and future experiences.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to better understand the AgriCorps Fellowship Program and the impact of international agricultural education fellowships. Therefore, the objectives of this study are to define how the AgriCorps fellowship program impacted the fellows' lives through experiences during and after the fellowship, as well as make recommendations to future like-programs based on fellows' experiences.

Methods

This phenomenological study included semi-structured virtual interviews with past AgriCorps fellows. We chose to explore this sample through qualitative methods due to its ability to capture, analyze, and understand participant experiences through their perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Seidman, 2006). Further, a phenomenological approach was used as participants provided a first-person description of their AgriCorps lived experience (Bhar, 2019). This study strived to understand their experiences; however, the experience is not entirely replicable in that fellows have different community, school, and country placements (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We maintained confidentiality through a verbal informed consent process and removing identifiers during data cleaning (Kaiser, 2009). Further, we removed all unnecessary contextual identifiers for dissemination or altered where possible to avoid deductive disclosure (Kaiser, 2009).

Context

The AgriCorps Fellowship began sending fellows to Ghana in 2014, with a range of 8 to 14 fellows each year. In 2016, AgriCorps expanded to Liberia. There have been five formal cohorts of fellows and one initial class (AgriCorps, 2021). AgriCorps fellows were the ideal sample for this study due to the nature of their experience in a long-term fellowship program. Studying fellows' experiences provided an opportunity to gain insight for evaluation and continuous improvement of similar programs.

Sample

This study analyzed the AgriCorps fellows' experiences. Therefore, all past fellows were in sample selection. The objective was to have a holistic sample of all past AgriCorps fellows to understand their experiences, thus there was no exclusion criteria (Robinson, 2013). The population included 54 fellows who participated in an AgriCorps fellowship, with 18 fellows who agreed to be interviewed. Participants were contacted through email with a total of 18 responding and scheduling an interview time in the two-week recruitment time-period.

Data Gathering

We interviewed participants via an online meeting platform (Wright, 2020). This platform allowed for 60 to 120-minute one-on-one interviews with fellows located across the globe with minimal cost within a three-week time period. The interview guide, as shown in appendix A, included questions that were open-ended and were written to understand the participants' experiences rather than simply a reflection (Given, 2008). To ensure confidentiality throughout data gathering, participant numbers were used throughout the whole process. Additionally, all data was kept on a password protected computer with access only for researchers listed on the approved Institutional Review Board application. Participants were read an informed consent document and verbally agreed to be interviewed and recorded.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, we used various procedures, including writing memos, field notes, recordings and transcription of interviews, and data and concept driven coding procedures using the constant comparative method as per Glaser and Strauss' (1967) method. Before coding, we removed all identifying information to maintain confidentiality (Kaiser, 2009). To code the data, we utilized the constant comparative method to find categories, and then themes for the participants responses (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). By two researchers listening to the interview and double checking the transcript, all incidents were coded and then placed into categories. Researchers deliberated about how incidents related to one another and were critical throughout the process. Researchers discussed the strengths of themes and rearrange incidents within themes to fit into the themes more appropriately. Researchers deliberated about how incidents related to one another and were critical throughout the process.

Trustworthiness Measures

Following Lincoln and Guba (1985) trustworthiness measures in qualitative research, researchers implemented several methods to ensure confidence. Throughout the process, researchers kept reflexive journals which established credibility and authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To continue dependability and confirmability, we kept careful documentation and performed an audit trail through deliberation with a fellow researcher, careful notes during and after interviews, and asking follow-up questions in interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This aligns with comprehensive field notes which addresses credibility and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally addressing credibility and transferability, we achieved data saturation

by having 18 interviews during the data collection process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interviews were audio recorded and had verbatim transcription through the Zoom or Microsoft Teams platform to ensure authenticity and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To address credibility and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we used peer debriefing as the final step used to establish themes and deliberation.

Findings

Based on our analysis, 12 themes and 64 sub themes emerged. The initial themes include: 1) growth after fellowship, 2) thoughts on AgriCorps post experience, 3) challenges, 4) AgriCorps responsibility, 5) discrimination, 6) enjoyed the culture, 7) reflection, 8) developed development philosophy, 9) adjusting to fellowship life, 10) engaging community, 11), language and 12) relationships built.

Growth after Fellowship

This theme articulates fellows' thoughts and feelings after completing the fellowship. This theme is most accurately described by its ten sub-themes: skill gain, value change, personal growth and confidence, professional career gain, career trajectory changed or affected, increased open mindedness, cultural competency, interpersonal relationship skills strengthened, communicating, and asking questions, international confidence, and appreciation.

In the sub-theme *skill gain*, fellows detailed gaining skills in various areas including financial responsibility, interpersonal skills, and teaching and professional skills. The fellowship gave participants "boots on the ground" experience, additionally their professional network expanded, and the experience is often used in professional situations, like interviews contributing to their professional career gain. Participant 11 stated, "Honestly it's helped me to be in the job that I am." Fellows said they now place a greater importance on strong and intentional friendships and relationships and being emotionally intelligent. Fellows grew in their ability to listen, ask in depth questions, and communicate with others. Participant 17 described, "it's made me a better listener, it's made me more inclusive and more respectful to people's experiences, and their cultural backgrounds." Fellows now feel confident traveling internationally to developing places and recognize and appreciate their ability to do so.

Thoughts on AgriCorps Post Experience

Fellows described their thoughts and views on AgriCorps after they completed their experience. Two contrasting sub-themes emerged: of lack of impact, and positive impact and appreciation.

Some fellows felt the experience did not impact their future career and life choices. Participant nine expressed that it, "felt like a lifetime ago at times, so it's hard to see how some of the impacts that I had over there while I was going through it impacted me now." In contrast, other fellows reflect positively on their experience on both the change and impact it had on their lives as well as their appreciation for AgriCorps and its mission.

Challenges

Throughout their fellowship, fellows experienced and had to overcome various challenges. The challenges are best described by the ten sub-themes: challenges with community, challenges with loneliness, health, challenges with timeliness, felt overwhelmed, witnessed traumatic events, safety threats in Liberia, challenges with food, challenges with teaching, and challenges with returning to the United States.

Fellows felt challenged with other teachers, students, host families, and their mission within the community. They also felt isolated from other fellows and within their communities, for example interviewee seven felt “alone with [their] thoughts.” Fellows also experienced varied non-emergency and emergency health situations. Fellows felt challenged with the lack of timeliness within their respective African cultures, participant 5 described a situation where,

I remember being so incredibly frustrated by the lack of respect for time even though I knew it was a thing, just trying to get a project off the ground, it seemed to take at least three times as long as I thought it should.

Fellows had feelings of being overwhelmed at different stages within their fellowship. Some fellows bore witness to upsetting events. There were also safety threats and concerns specifically for fellows working in Liberia. Other challenges included adopting new food customs, such as frequent market visits, elongated cooking time, and lack of refrigeration. Fellows faced varied challenges in the teaching sphere of the fellowship including differences in educational norms and lack of participation from students and teaching colleagues. Participant five described a challenge in “trying to get them to see agriculture as a business is very, very challenging, but also really rewarding once we kind of figured out how to do that.”

AgriCorps Responsibility

The organization, AgriCorps, held specific responsibilities, such as training, leadership, stipends, that fellows reflect on fondly or aspects where they were challenged. The seven sub-themes describe AgriCorps Responsibility as: difficulty with organization's leadership, first week generated varied responses, positive reflection towards training, stipend posed challenges, external support, expectations, and need for improved communication.

Fellows' expectations of staff were not always met, posing challenges with AgriCorps staff and leadership. Participant 15 had mixed emotions stating, “I think the leaders of AgriCorps were great, they really did a fantastic job, but I think with our group they're almost kind of like ready to check out too.” Fellows detailed struggles with the stipend abilities to cover costs in Liberia, in city living, and financial struggles with arriving in the US. Participant one detailed it by stating, “AgriCorps was only giving us a stipend of, you know, like \$200 a month so there wasn't a lot, it worked fine in the village, it did not work fine in the capital city.” Some fellows described the need for AgriCorps to set boundaries and expectations with fellows. Participant 13 described this scenario as, “Respecting boundaries of fellows having the ability to have some privacy and have their own reflections and their own thoughts and their own opinions about things without it being something that they control.”

Discrimination

Throughout their experience, fellows faced discrimination in a variety of ways both positive and negative. The sub-themes that describe this theme include nationality-based advancement, female gender disparity, male gender advancement, race-based behavior change, perceived gender roles, female solidarity, race-based expectations, and feeling like an outsider. When it comes to gender and race identity, participant 16 said it best as “it’s a mixed bag.” Fellows experienced a positive bias based on their American nationalities. The female fellows described negative prejudice effects because of their female gender identity. Participant five discusses these sub-themes stating,

There were some differences so as being a female and identifying as such that, I think there maybe was a little bit of hesitation, especially from men to kind of take what I was saying and put some value to it. But as unfortunate as it is I think honestly like because I was an American, as well. I think I was more probably respected than the average female. Um, so I think it kind of evens out.

In contrast, fellows with a male gender identity faced positive gender-based biases. Participant 16 described he was “probably blessed” because he was “in [an] easier position than my female colleagues.” Fellows who identified as white received local behavior change via locals instilling inflated authority, however, fellows of color received discriminatory behavior based on their race.

Fellows felt frustrated with specific gender roles, participant 17 mentioned there were “certain things that people expected me to do or expected of me because I am female.” Although female fellows also mentioned they felt gender provided connections with local women. There were more frustrations with fellows who identify as white felt locals expected monetary gifts. For reasons based on gender, race, and nationality, fellows described they sometimes felt “like an outsider” to their community.

Enjoyed the Culture

This theme describes how fellows enjoyed the culture of their respective country. The four sub-themes that describe this theme include community within culture, friendliness within culture, growth within culture, and West Africa vs. United States.

Fellows grew in their love, comfort, and enjoyment of West African culture throughout their fellowship experience. Participant ten explained in their community, “there's always someone close by. There's always someone who will have your back like there's such a sense of community.” Fellows appreciated the generosity and friendliness of local culture. When reflecting on their experience, fellows mentioned stark differences and similarities between West Africa and the United States’ cultures, and areas in which Ghana supersedes the United States. Participant three mentions the differences stating, “there's definitely pros and cons because we're so advanced in so many areas, but I think we lack a lot of the personal skills and a lot of the community aspects that they have there.”

Reflection

The fellows placed great impact on the reflection aspect of their fellowship. To best describe the theme, four sub-themes emerged of negative feelings towards reflection, positive results towards reflection, Still Harbor aided reflection, and varied methods of reflection.

Some fellows felt unsuccessful with personal reflection, specifically journaling, that it “wasn’t [their] thing.” Although, through reflection fellows experienced personal growth, changed behavior, feelings of support, and strengthened cohort community. Fellows utilized various methods of reflection including taking pictures, interpersonal dialogue, blogging, journaling, inter-fellow communication, and communicating with their US community.

Developed Development Philosophy

Fellows adapted their own development philosophy during and after their experience. Three sub-themes to describe this development include longed for longer engagement, positive feelings toward AgriCorps development philosophy and altered development philosophy.

Not only did fellows wish their experience itself was longer across varied fellowship lengths, but they also believed prolonged engagement is necessary for effective development. Participant two questioned the length stating, “how effective is it to have a fellow there for 10 months and then not one the next?” Fellows appreciated AgriCorps’ specific approach to development and hope for the mission’s continuation. Through their experience, fellows now think deeply about sustainable and appropriate development.

Adjusting to Fellowship Life

There were various aspects fellows adjusted to for their daily life in their respective community. The four sub-themes include food, daily activities, adjusting to the culture, and hygiene.

Fellows adjusted to and enjoyed local cuisine and to their daily routines, navigating the community, and teaching obligations. In terms of culture, fellows adjusted well to increased socialization within communities and being independent as a fellow. Participant six described their adjustment to teaching as, “the first couple days of teaching I was exhausted and then I kind of found my jive.”

Engaging Community

Fellows found it important to engage the community. They did this through six sub-themes of daily operations, appreciated host family, experience with farmers, building rapport, lead by example, and engaging with students.

Fellows spent the majority of their day active in their communities either teaching, working on farms, and building relationships with locals. They reflected positively on their host family experience and remained in contact with them post fellowship. Participant 14 explained, “My life was completely impacted by the fellowship experience, but mostly through the family that I lived with I fell in love with them.” Fellows built strong relationships and relied on local, smallholder farmers within their community. They felt building rapport was vital and worked hard to achieve it with the whole community. Participant 17 described building rapport as

“something that's really important to me was building relationships with the students.” They also enjoyed working with students at various levels and witnessed growth amongst their students.

Language

Fellows commonly encountered language challenges. They described this theme in three sub-themes including want for increased language training, language barrier, and positive aspects.

Fellows indicated they wanted increased and community targeted language training. They struggled with the language barrier, particularly with rural farmers. Although there were positive aspects of fellows who experienced aid from their community with the language barrier and increased language competency through their experience as participant three mentioned, “being in the community helps so much and helped me improve my speaking abilities, but just being immersed in it. AgriCorps was very supportive though and helped us as much as they could.”

Relationships Built

Throughout their fellowship, fellows built relationships with a variety of people. The three sub-themes describing these relationships include strong fellow bond, international friendships, and post experience connections.

Fellows felt their cohort had a strong bond, was a great support system, engaged in bonding activities, and a highlight of their experience. Participant ten reflected on their current friendships with fellows in their cohort saying the friendships were a “mega huge highlight of the experience,” and they are still in close contact with them.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The AgriCorps fellowship demonstrated how participating in an experiential learning opportunity can impact one's life. Through their teaching and interacting with the community, fellows were able to successfully go through all components of the experiential learning model and continue to do so in their everyday lives because of their international experience (Kolb, 1976). The findings supported Kolb's experiential learning model as participants now use concepts learned in new experiences (Kolb, 1976). This study adds to the literature about international experiences contribute to participants' personal and professional growth (Czerwionka et al., 2015; Harder et al., 2012; O'Malley et al., 2019; Rubenstein et al., 2018; Vatalaro et al., 2015).

Long-term fellowships, like that of AgriCorps, occur through various organizations, like the Peace Corps, International Agricultural Education Fellowship Program, various NGOs, etc. This study's findings have applicability in such situations. Therefore, recommendations from this study should be taken into consideration when designing or improving a similar program. Our recommendations based upon our findings include practitioners including language training, sexual harassment and health emergency protocol, mental health and reflection support, and post-fellowship support.

In this fellowship, fellows received a brief language training, but did not feel it was sufficient or specific enough to their region or community, and it inhibited their ability to properly communicate. Therefore, we recommend like-programs provide language training and

have specific training to the regional dialect in which they will be placed and have as prolonged an experience in language training as realistically possible.

It is also vital the program have protocols in place for sexual harassment and health emergencies. Fellows reflected upon multiple incidents where these protocols were necessary, therefore implementation of such policies and action-plans is necessary to support and protect fellows.

Reflection, both individual and group, and mental health support were major reflections of fellows. Because the fellows valued reflection so greatly, we recommend future programming and like programs continue and implement in-depth reflection as a group, individual reflection techniques, and overall reflection support for fellowship participants. It is also important the fellows have access to mental health and reflection resources before, during, and after their experiences.

Lastly, we recommend, the organization assist participants in adapting back into their home country culture after having a long-term fellowship. Fellows expressed feelings of anger and reverse culture shock in their post-fellowship experience within the United States. Fellows additionally expressed the lack of ability to properly communicate about their experiences in their post-fellowship lives. This inhibits the ability of the fellow to both process their own experience, assimilate in their community, and accurately share new-found knowledge with their home communities.

In addition to practitioner recommendations, future research should examine the longitudinal impacts of long-term international experiences and/or fellowships. While this study had participants from a variety of different class years, the data would be enhanced if the sample could be continually interviewed to determine the extended impacts. Additionally, future research should explore specific objectives such as the influence of gender, age, educational background, etc. By only examining a single objective, it would assist in narrowing the focus of the study and align with different applicable theories to guide the study.

In conclusion, we know West Africa's youth population continues to grow, as does their need for sustainable jobs and support through a transformative SBAE system. Fellowship programs like AgriCorps are a way to empower youth to be a catalyst for change in their communities through SBAE. This study supports previous research indicating international experiences influence personal and professional growth (Czerwionka et al., 2015; Harder et al., 2012; O'Malley et al., 2019; Roberts & Edwards, 2018; Rubenstein et al., 2018; Vatalaro et al., 2015). However, to be successful in supporting this population, fellows must be equipped for their duties, and supported in unique and necessary ways. Fellowship programs must support the experiential learning process of their fellows in order for those individuals to properly support the communities they wish to help.

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Appendix A. Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. What year were you an AgriCorps fellow?
2. What year were you born?
3. What is your current occupation?
 1. How has the fellowship impacted your career choice?
4. Where were you living prior to the fellowship?
 1. Do you live there currently?
 2. Did the fellowship impact your views of moving to new places?
5. How old were you when you started your fellowship?
 1. Were you coming out of education or career?
6. What were your experiences in agriculture prior to the fellowship?
7. What were your experiences in agricultural education prior to the fellowship?
8. Any international travel experience prior to the fellowship?
 1. After?
9. Who/what inspired you to seek international experiences?
10. Tell me about your first week as a fellow
 1. Did this align with your expectations?
11. Tell me about the typical day as a fellow
 1. What are examples of things you adjusted well to in your daily routine?
 2. What are examples of challenges you found in your daily routine?
12. How did your gender identity impact your experience?
13. How did you grow personally during your time as a fellow?
 1. Professionally?
14. In what ways could your fellowship have been improved?
15. What challenges did you incur during your fellowship?
16. How did this growth impact your life when you returned to the United States after your fellowship?
17. Did you do self-reflection during and/or after your time as a fellow?
 1. What did you do to reflect?
 2. Did you feel supported during your reflection?
18. What opportunities arose because of your participation in AgriCorps fellowship?
19. How was your life impacted by the fellowship experience?
20. Is there anything you wish the researchers to know before we conclude the interview?