

## **From Siberia to Kansas and back: Local impacts of international collaboration between universities**

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### **Abstract**

Short-term international field study programs are becoming a more commonly utilized mechanism for providing university students with international experiences as part of their education. This paper utilizes qualitative research methods to explore the benefits and impacts on students and faculty in the Altai Republic, Russian Federation resulting from a long-term partnership providing short-term field study opportunities. Program participants from the Altai Republic engaged in interviews where they discussed the impacts of the experience at individual, university, community, and international levels. Key findings indicate that the experiences of students in these programs positively impacted their self-concept, enhanced their educational experience and helped them make career choices. Additionally, students reported changes in their attitudes toward Americans. Faculty noted significant student impacts and benefits to their teaching.

### **Key words**

Short-term international field study, university exchange programs, Altai Republic, Russian Federation, Kansas.

## **Introduction**

University-sponsored short-term international field study is a mechanism for globalizing the university educational experience and for engaging students for whom traditional study abroad programs aren't feasible or possible. Much can be gained from participating in these types of activities, not only by students, but also by the faculty, institutions and communities involved. This paper explores the impacts of short-term international field study experiences from the perspectives of non-U.S. participants in a collaborative exchange between universities in Siberia and Kansas. After providing background information on the history of the partnership, a description of the Siberian context and an overview of our program structure, the results of interviews with program participants is presented. The participants discussed the impacts of our collaborative programs, which they identified at student, teacher, university, community, and international levels.

## **Background**

Since 1999 we have coordinated a university exchange program involving Gorno-Altai State University (GASU) in the Altai Republic, Russian Federation and several universities in Kansas, United States. Many people don't have the first clue about where the Altai Republic is located (perhaps the same can be said about Kansas). The Altai is about as far away from Kansas as you can get and still be on planet Earth. There is a twelve hour time difference between Altai and Kansas and it takes days to travel the 6,169 miles or 9,929 kilometers separating us. The Altai Republic is located in southwestern Siberia, just north of where the borders of China, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia meet.

### ***The Altai Republic and GASU***

The Republic is the homeland of the Altaian people, the indigenous inhabitants of the area, which now comprise approximately one-third of the Republic's population of 200,000. In 2006, the Republic celebrated the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Altaian peoples voluntarily joining the Russian Empire. In 1991, the Altai Republic emerged as a semi-autonomous republic during the reconfiguration that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Until recently, the Altai Republic's populace elected the president of their own republic. Now the head of the republic is nominated by the President of Russia and approved by the local Parliament.

The Republic is situated in a mountainous ecosystem with a highly varied terrain, ranging from rocky alpine outcrops to densely forested taiga. Herding is one of the main economic activities in the republic and many indigenous Altaians maintain their traditional semi-nomadic lifestyle. In the past few years, tourism has increased and is viewed as a potential area for economic development.

Gorno-Altai State University was founded in 1949 as a teacher training institute and in 1993 became a classical university. GASU has 3,023 full-time and 1,883 part-time students, 100 of which are postgraduates. GASU has 400 academic staff or instructors and also runs a second-level agricultural college that has 413 full-time and 144 part-time students. There are 10 departments at the university: biology and chemistry, economics, foreign languages, geography, history, law, physics and math, philology, and psychology and education. In addition to its partnerships with U.S. universities, GASU also participates in collaborative projects with educational institutions in Mongolia, Canada, Belgium, and France.

### ***The Exchange***

The partners in this exchange program include GASU, Haskell Indian Nations University, Kansas State University and the University of Kansas. Our collaboration's primary activity has been short-term student and faculty exchanges. Since 1999, there have been 24 trips in one or the other direction, involving at least 75 travelers (this represents 32 individuals; many of us are repeat offenders). These exchanges have covered a range of topics and activities. We began our work with a project focused on water quality and the threads of this original project continue to run through our mutual work (For more details, see <http://www.engg.ksu.edu/CHSR/international/altai/>). A unifying element of much of our work has been establishing cultural connections between indigenous people in the U.S. and the Altai Republic.

### ***International Field Study***

As an educational process, our work can best be described as short-term international field study (Stanitski & Fuellhart, 2003). This type of model has been utilized by other U.S. universities as one way to help make international experiences more accessible for a broader array of students (Adam, 2003; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005). The short duration and subsequently smaller commitment of time and money make this type of program more realistic

and attainable for students who don't traditionally participate in study abroad programs. We've found this model to be quite effective for involving Native American undergraduate students, a group with traditionally low rates of participation in international programs (Calhoon, Wildcat, Annett, Pierotti & Griswold, 2003).

Our programs are generally three-to-four weeks long and involve students and faculty traveling together and working as a team with their peers in either the Altai Republic or the U.S. Program participants engage in learning about real world problems in local contexts. Our students and faculty have worked together to study issues related to water quality, environmental journalism, graze land management, and small mammal populations. This type of educational experience is important in many ways. Traveling internationally as part of a university education provides students with something they can't find in a traditional classroom setting. Participants are able to experience and learn about real issues facing humans and environments in a variety of settings by "traveling to experience diverse cultures, interpreting the physical landscape by seeing it with one's own eyes, and learning about sustainability issues through meeting with representatives abroad" (Stanitski and Fuellhart, 2003, p. 203).

Our programs incorporate elements of inquiry-based learning as our approach utilizes "real world" data and situations, is flexible and open, utilizes the varied skills from a number of different fields, and views faculty as co-learners who guide the experience (Magnussen, Ishida, & Itano, 2000). This approach helps to develop the problem solving and critical thinking skills of students, provides experience in group collaboration, as well as giving them a high degree of responsibility for their own learning (Dunlap, 2005). As program administrators, we also strive to teach our students about how to develop rich and mutually beneficial collaborations by modeling such relationships ourselves. Our programs are administered jointly by staff from both countries and decisions about activities and the directions of our work are made cooperatively. To achieve close collaboration, exchange activities should 1) strive to maximize participant interaction, 2) emphasize an equal and balanced exchange of information, and 3) provide information in all utilized languages (Driever, Perfiljeva, Callister, & McGivern, 2005). To the furthest extent possible, we emphasize balance in terms of numbers of participants from each country, spend as much time as possible together in field settings (both work time and play time), and include a healthy number of interpreters to promote good communication.

### ***Outcomes of international collaborations***

There are few who would disagree with the benefits of international education. Assessments of one study abroad program showed that participants experienced enhanced cultural awareness, self-confidence, and independence (Black & Duhon, 2006). There is evidence of strong support for international education and the study of foreign languages on the part of the American public (Green, 2002). Some scholars describe it as the best possible solution to national security threats (Hamilton, 2003; Green, 2002). "International educational exchange is one of the main antidotes to ignorance. By allowing the exchange of people from all comers of the globe, international education consistently erodes prejudices and misunderstandings. Not only does it provide the opportunity to better understand a culture, it allows a person to view him or herself and his or her culture from a more objective perspective" (Hamilton, 2003, p. 34).

There are many examples of the benefits of study abroad and international exchanges in U.S. journals and publications, focusing specifically on the experiences of U.S. participants (Adam, 2003; Black & Duhon, 2006; Heuer, Bengiamin, & Downey, 2001; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005; McKeowen, 2003; and Stachowski & Brantmeier, 2002). A few notable exceptions describe international exchanges in terms of mutual benefit to all parties (Dean, 2005; Driever et al., 2005). Surely there is merit in exploring the benefits of U.S.-funded international educational experiences from the perspectives of non-U.S. participants.

### **GASU Participant Perspectives**

While we have been devoted to this relationship since 1999 and are firm believers in the positive benefits of international exchange experiences for university students and faculty, we only recently took the time to explore with our participants in the Altai just how these programs have benefited them. Seven participants in our programs were interviewed, three faculty members and four former student participants (it is worth noting that these former student participants continue to be involved in our projects). The conversations focused on benefits of the projects to the participants, the university and the community.

#### ***Impact on students***

Not surprisingly, a lot of the conversation focused on the impacts of our projects on students. These ranged from developing professional skills in their respective fields to changes in

attitudes and perceptions. Our exchanges have involved Russian students from the sciences and foreign languages.

Vera Aleinikova, dean of chemistry and biology at GASU, noted the differences between students who have participated in our programs and those who haven't.

The students differ from the others in the knowledge that they received during the trip. This is thanks to talking to different people, learning about more problems and issues related to water quality in another country, meeting people, thinking about the issues from different angles and different levels. And all the students go on working on these problems...They have different minds. They think differently, they see more aspects of a problem. (V. Aleinikova, personal communication, November 7, 2006)

For one student participant in particular, involvement in our projects affected his choice of career. Victor Mamrashev is a graduate of GASU's biology and chemistry department. He traveled to the U.S. twice as part of our exchange programs. The first time he visited the U.S. was in May 2002 as part of a U.S. Agency for International Development/Association Liaison Office-funded project. The focus of this trip was working on drinking water quality as part of a group of U.S. and Russian faculty and students. During his second trip the following year funded by the National Science Foundation, he spent time working in a chemistry lab at Kansas State University as part of an individual program. Victor M. has also been heavily involved in working with U.S. exchange participants during their visits to the Altai Republic.

Victor M. currently works in the Republic's equivalent of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. He also teaches physical chemistry classes at GASU and is pursuing a Kandidat's degree (equivalent to a Ph.D. in the U.S.) in bio-geochemistry. When asked how our programs had impacted him personally, his answer was surprising.

Being involved in these projects affected my current job choice...As we worked with water quality problems, I chose it as the theme of my bachelor's degree and after that I began working in the Center of Laboratory Analysis and Technical Measurement. The function of this center is to observe the quality of the environment in the Republic and the level of environmental pollution and the impact of industry, how industry affects nature. I think I wouldn't have chosen this kind of job if I hadn't taken part in this project. (V. Mamrashev, personal communication, April 24, 2006)

In truth, before participating in our programs, Victor M. was contemplating a different career path altogether.

I was planning to work on environmental problems, that's true, when I was in high school. I was about to change my plans and I would probably have chosen something else, like working in the militia (police force). Being involved in these projects I began to think about a career in science. (V. Mamrashev, personal communication, April 24, 2006)

Victor M. also credits his participation in our programs to his decision to pursue a post-graduate degree.

David Khaydarov is another science student who has been heavily involved in our programs. David traveled to the U.S. in June 2003 as part of a group visiting Kansas, New Mexico and Arizona. Like Victor M., David continues to participate in U.S. exchange visits to the area. David is a biology major, who completed his GASU degree in 2006. Participating in our programs has enriched David's education. He reported that "each year I take some new knowledge and skills, cause every time I meet new specialists in different fields of science (D. Khaydarov, personal communication, April 24, 2006).

One of David's professors, Nikolai Malkov, reported that David greatly benefited from his participation in our programs, which has helped shape his future academic career. After completing his degree, David originally planned to stay in Gorno-Altai to work on his Kandidat's degree. However, as an undergraduate David has been the recipient of many scholarships and awards. For the past three years, David has received first place in GASU's student science competition. A number of Moscow higher educational institutions competed for him as a graduate student. This fall he began graduate studies in ecology at Moscow Pedagogical State University.

According to Nikolai:

David and his erudition have grown up very, very much and his understanding of problems has become much wider, much better. As a biology specialist, I gave him a lot, but David gained much from his communication with Cynthia Annett, Ray Pierotti and Dan Wildcat (U.S. faculty participants). He had to practice English more often than other students. This is why now he has access to the world's literature and it raises his professional level. As he worked to express himself in Russian and English he learned as

well to put his thoughts on paper. He has published a number of papers. He participated in a number of conferences, not only in Gorno-Altai. Many ornithologists in Russia know him already. He got much from American specialists and his trip to the United States. (N. Malkov, personal communication, April 18, 2006)

In addition to shaping David's scientific education, our projects also impacted his perceptions of Americans.

For me and for a lot of my friends and family there always existed, a kind of stereotype of how foreigners and especially Americans should look and their general attitude toward our country. During the times of the cold war and perestroika it changed several times, but it always was hostile. When I saw my first set of Americans it happened in the U.S...It was very hard to understand that all these people are actually the same people as I've seen in Russia, but they have a different culture...But morphologically they are the same. If I wasn't involved with the projects and hadn't had contact with any of the teachers or students of the USA, I would still think that all Americans look like scary military (types) or something like that. Especially in light of the latest news of what is happening in the Middle East and the politics of the U.S., I would think that nothing has changed from the time of the cold war. (D. Khaydarov, personal communication, April 24, 2006)

As a result of our programs, science students are able to improve their capacities and focus their careers. Language students also benefit from their experiences. According to Victor Lukyanenko, director of international programs and former dean of foreign languages at GASU:

It goes without saying that it was something special for the languages students when they were able to see that what they study here in Siberia is not just a class, is not just a lesson. This is some sort of living being, a living language, spoken by all the people in the United States. (V. Lukyanenko, personal communication, April 18, 2006)

During the exchanges, the languages students worked as translators for other student and faculty participants. Having this type of function impacted student self-concept. Masha Ostanina was one of the language students who participated in the first exchange trip to the U.S. in 2002.



Currently she is teaching English to first year students at GASU and pursuing a Kandidat's degree. As Masha explains:

I myself began to feel more confident and at the same time I felt more responsibility. Before the trip, before the exchange I didn't treat my knowledge, my abilities so seriously. I didn't think that anybody would need me. I was just a student. I would graduate from the university, go to Ongudai (Masha's home region in Altai) and teach there in the school and nobody else would need me; Just the pupils in school. And here was something different. That's where the responsibility came from. We went there to work. (M. Ostanina, personal communication, April 17, 2006)

Julia Mekechinova is another former languages student who has been involved with our programs since the first exchange trip. Julia traveled to the U.S. in 2002 and 2003 during group exchanges and assisted with interpretation. She is currently working as an English teacher at the Pedagogical College in Gorno-Altai. She is also involved in coordinating a cultural exchange with a group of Native American dancers and singers. When asked how she thought her life might have been different if she hadn't participated in the exchanges, she said that she still would have finished university and become a teacher, but the experiences helped her perspective transform. Something that was really valuable for her was meeting and accepting another culture. Being exposed to and learning about a different way of life helped her to understand and value her own culture.

Often when U.S. participants travel to Altai, they are asked to spend time in classes talking with students. Julia discussed the benefits to students participating in this aspect of the exchange.

Access to and interaction with native speakers of English is very useful to students. In addition to the practical skill development, the communication itself is precious.

Communication with people from other countries makes students more open and exposes them to new ideas and perspectives. (J. Mekechinova, personal communication, April 12, 2006)

These exchanges offer students experiences that they haven't had before. Most of the GASU students involved in our programs haven't had the opportunity to travel very much within their own country, little less internationally. As Masha said:

For me personally it was much more than just a good experience. I'd never been further than Biisk (a city approximately 100 kilometers from Gorno-Altai) before and I could see for myself the capital of Russia. We made altogether six flights from here. It was the first time. (M. Ostanina, personal communication, April 17, 2006)

### ***Impact on teachers***

Because our programs are university based, all of our participants are involved in education in some form or another. Our exchange activities naturally impact the teaching in which our participants engage. Most of the interview participants who are teachers (which is all of them except David, who most assuredly will be one day) discussed how beneficial travel to the U.S. has been on their teaching. Julia noted that as a teacher, her experiences with the projects have made it possible for her to give her students the benefits and insights of her personal experiences in the U.S. and in working with American visitors. "I don't have to rely on only what I have learned from books. My continuing involvement in the projects also gives me the opportunity to have American visitors participate in my classes, which is beneficial to students" (J. Mekechinova, personal communication, April 12, 2006).

Masha also felt that her experiences affected her teaching.

Communicating with many Americans changed my language and my attitude toward it. It changed my attitude to the English language and I look at it differently because I stopped treating it as one language. It has split into two different languages for me because of this program and these people. (M. Ostanina, personal communication, April 17, 2006)

Participation in our programs not only is useful for the teaching of English. It also has helped science professors with their teaching. According to Nikolai:

Being a specialist in biogeography it helped me in my course on ecology. My knowledge is mainly based on the literature. But when I saw the biodiversity of different parts of the world, like the southwestern United States, it helped me a lot to develop some new knowledge as a scientist and as a teacher. (N. Malkov, personal communication, April 18, 2006)

### ***Impact on university***

Our projects enhance the university's capacity to participate in international exchanges and have increased the level of international opportunities for faculty and students. As Victor L. stated:

Normal people do not live in Siberia; they find warmer places like California. But it just so happens that I was born here, that I lived here all my life and had a chance to introduce another life, another culture to...about twenty people who had a chance to travel to the United States and see other scenery, different landscapes, different people, different cultures, and love it. Officially being director of International Programs, I'm for this. There was really great interest in the university in this international collaboration. (V. Lukyanenko, personal communication, April 18, 2006)

During the course of these kinds of relationships and projects, it is normal for there to be material benefits at the institutional level. Our work is no different. Over the past six years, many materials and supplies have been provided to GASU. These include books (both related to science and languages), a computer and other instructional equipment, a spectrophotometer and other water quality assessment equipment, small mammal traps, appliances for the university apartments, and the flags of the U.S. and State of Kansas. (For several years, this last item was prominently displayed in the foreign languages department. It's likely that this is the most interesting and unusual place the Kansas state flag has ever been.) As part of our water quality projects, several water testing kits were provided to the university and select schools in the Republic. All of these items help to build the infrastructure of the university and are beneficial at many levels. According to Victor M.:

A lot of students use (these resources) for their research and my thesis used that equipment. As for the test kits, students of the university are not just specialists in some particular science, they're teachers. They take these test kits into schools and work with them there. They use them to explain to children important things about the environment, science, pollution and water quality. (V. Mamrashev, personal communication, April 24, 2006)

Vera related that the use of the test kits (LaMotte, n.d.) in university teaching was beneficial as students can:

Take them in their hands and conduct experiments. The test kits are ideal for use in the classroom or field as they don't take much time, they don't need different chemicals which we sometimes can't afford, and the testing can be done where the sample is collected. They are very easy. (V. Alenikova, personal communication, November 7, 2006)

In addition to the previously discussed benefits to students and the infrastructure, participants agreed that the university benefited from our projects in a less tangible way. Both Masha and David agreed that the projects help the university to be less isolated from the rest of the world, which they cited as a benefit. David said:

We had for a very long time an Iron Curtain, a barrier, between our two countries and two different societies...I think that our university is very lucky cause each year we take part in several grants, and students and teachers from GASU are able to cooperate and converse with the representatives of that world from which we were isolated for so many years. That's why I think it's very, very valuable for the university in general and for me in particular. (D. Khaydarov, personal communication, April 24, 2006)

Masha said:

It means a lot for the university. It's very important because our university should not be isolated from the rest of the world. It's like two persons, if they just sit alone in silence in one room, there will be no outcome; the same with universities. It's very good that it was such a long distance between Haskell and K-State and our university, GASU. It's very important to have this experience. (M. Ostanina, personal communication, April 17, 2006)

### ***Impact on Republic***

It should be evident that what is good for students, teachers, and the university is also good for the Republic. As a result of these programs, there are better students and better teachers; there are scientists with international experiences working for the Republic. School children have learned more about environmental issues and hopefully this information has been shared with their parents and families. But what do the program participants view as contributions to the Republic?

According to Vera, school programs on water quality benefit students, their local communities, and influences the career paths of high school students.

[The project] has a good benefit which is apparent in students' understanding of the problems. They are willing to solve the problems if they can and they develop the desire to come to the university and be students of the chemistry department. (V. Aleinikova, personal communication, November 7, 2006)

Some schools that have been provided testing kits and materials utilize these resources for the benefit of both students and the local community. As part of an optional course for students interested in chemistry and biology, high school students in the village of Yadat near Lake Teletskaya (which is developing into a major tourist area in the Republic) use the test kits to "take samples of drinking water from wells and rivers and they have a table which they filled in with the data they collected, so this is one case where the school monitored the water quality of their town" (V. Aleinikova, personal communication, November 7, 2006).

David feels that the media coverage of GASU's international activities, which are reported throughout the republic are important.

One of the benefits of the cooperation for our city...is that each year you visit us we can find a lot of articles in different newspapers. People not only from Gorno-Altai but from other parts of the Republic know what happens here and what people from our university do here. So they all see that not only Russian people but Americans and people from other countries have the same problems as Russian people have here. Probably this stimulates their curiosity about all the things we cooperate in. It's important, I think, to get the results of our work published. (D. Khaydarov, personal communication, April 24, 2006)

According to Victor M., this publicity could have a very good impact on the Republic. "If people from other countries are interested in our ecological problems, maybe there are some reasons to care about the environment here. People would think so, I hope" (V. Mamrashev, personal communication, April 24, 2006). Masha also sees a benefit to the community as a result of this publicity.

I think it's very important for them to know that some people over the ocean are interested in students, in faculty, in the work here in our republic. Because many

people live here and they don't think there are many exciting things here and maybe they treat their life as boring and dull. Not much entertainment. But here they felt that if somebody is interested in the university maybe there really is something worth talking about. (M. Ostanina, personal communication, April 24, 2006)

Perhaps one of the most important outcomes of our collaboration at the Republic level has to do with cultural issues. According to Julia, this is true. She said she felt the most important aspect of our joint work was that we paid attention and gave emphasis to cultural issues. A movement toward giving attention to local cultural traditions has only just begun in the Altai. Our programs have contributed to this awareness and the possibilities to preserve local culture. U.S. participants in the exchange have discussed with local people the issues, culture, and history of different Native American tribes. From these conversations, local people have gotten ideas about what steps they can take to preserve local culture and traditions. Julia further stated:

It has also been useful for people here to see examples of how other non-mainstream cultures in another country are valued. There is something useful in this connection with other people with a shared or similar history, culture, and issues. It validates what they wish to do here in Altai and affirms that they are on the right track. (J. Mekechinova, personal communication, April 12, 2006)

### ***Impact at the international level***

Program participants are very aware that our rather small university exchange has much larger ramifications and that it's appropriate to think about the benefits of our work to the relationships between our two nations.

In recalling her visit to the U.S., Masha reminisced about meeting American university students.

It was interesting for them to know more about our university, our country. Because also it is an international exchange, we represent Russia and they represent another country, the United States of America. So it's not only the communication of two universities, but the countries, too. That's another level. (M. Ostanina, personal communication, April 17, 2006)

In discussing how the exchange program began, Nikolai reminded us that it was rooted in a past exchange program between scientists in the U.S. and Russia. Through this exchange, a U.S. and a Russian scientist met and decided to pursue future collaborations.

And as a result we've got some long term and very good relationships. Otherwise no one would know about us. Victor and I made it possible for the university to develop the relationship with American universities. Not only for the university, but for the Altai Republic and Russia. And you know that the political antagonism between the two systems gave birth to improper understanding of other nations, of other people's cultures especially in Russia about Americans and in America about Russians. (N. Malkov, personal communication, April 18, 2006)

Exchange programs can help to alleviate and ameliorate these misunderstandings. There is much we can learn from one another. Sharing information about ourselves and our countries openly and honestly will only benefit us all. Victor L. summarized this sentiment, "Of course there are problems in Russia. There are problems in the United States. And understanding this, we can understand each other better" (V. Lukyanenko, personal communication, April 18, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

There are many ways in which short-term international field study and international university exchanges impact students, teachers, universities, communities, and international relationships. In addition to changes in students' perceptions about their professions and self-concepts, their ideas about other countries and peoples can be altered by these types of experiences. These activities also support the professional development of teachers and help bring additional resources to the classroom. Universities benefit from the resources that partnerships bring, as well as the connections and relationships themselves. Benefits can also be realized at community and international levels.

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