This study examines the content and nature of internationally oriented professional development for U.S. K-16 teachers. More specifically, it focuses on understanding the range and nature of opportunities to learn in federally funded short-term Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad (GPA) proposals. The GPA program is one of four programs created under the Mutual Education and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961 (Fulbright-Hays Act), aimed at increasing international understanding through international study and exchanges, and complements domestically-focused Title VI (NDEA/HEA) programs. Together, these programs provide the main infrastructure for federally funded U.S. international education.

The GPA program is one of the few programs that support international-related professional development for K-16 teachers. It is funded at more than four million dollars per year. Despite its importance and the changing needs of teachers and their students, this program has not changed in close to 40 years. The proposals in this study are seen as expressions of their proposer’s conceptualization of internationalization and professional development, as operationalized to meet the requirements of the GPA program. That is, the proposer’s conceptualization is inferred from empirical data from the proposals.

This study is an analysis of funded GPA proposals using quantitative and qualitative methods. The sample is a stratified probability sample of one third of the target population of 172 funded GPA proposals. Because of the difficulty and time required to obtain funded proposals (even though they are theoretically available in the public domain) the target population was limited to five years (2003-2007). A content analysis was conducted which involved developing a coding scheme and the coding of proposals. Building on these results a principal component analysis was done to search for patterns and possible structures. Component scores were computed and proposals were dichotomized according to their scores on three components dealing with language, immersion and academic-curricular demands. This resulted in eight groups of proposals which were further explored in a more qualitative way and compared with what is known about effective professional development.

The GPA proposals described in this study represent different purposes and visions about what is important to learn about a country or society and how such learning should happen. They are the product of a negotiation between the visions of Congress and policymakers, ED, GPA program administrators and reviewers, project directors/authors of GPAs and their institutions, and the needs and goals of educators for whom they are written. While many of the GPAs in the sample went above and beyond the requirements of the GPA program, they fall short when compared with research on professional development and teacher learning. This study shows clearly that there is a need for the GPA program to be reviewed and rethought to make GPAs more effective in terms of professional development and better rooted in the aims of internationalization.

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