

Agricultural Education Faculty: Are They Prepared for Diversity?



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Abstract

Department heads and program leaders in agricultural education were surveyed using a Web-based questionnaire to determine the extent to which departments and faculty were addressing issues of diversity in their programs and in the preparation of new teaching faculty. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data. The results showed limited numbers of current and new faculty are being prepared to work in diverse situations and address diversity issues. Faculty engagement in diversity workshops and seminars was limited. In the area of diversity-related research, much more is needed as less than a third of the universities reported their faculty members are engaged in such research. However, 75% of university agricultural education programs encouraged diversity-related statements in correspondences, publications, and when discussing teacher education topics.

Introduction

Diversity is a broad concept encompassing characteristics such as gender, race/ethnicity, age, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, disability, geographical region—both international and domestic, and religion (Wakefield and Talbert, 1999). The United States is a diverse society in terms of culture, geography, ethnicity, and socio-economic status (Galambos, 2003). According to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 30 percent of the population is racial or ethnic minority groups. The Census Bureau projects that by the year 2100, non-Hispanic whites will make up 40 percent of the U.S. population. This has made diversity a significant social aspect of the American society and of increasing importance in higher education as evidenced by a growing minority undergraduate enrollment from 29% in 1995 to a projected 37% in 2015 (Carnevale and Fry, 2000).

In institutes of higher education, students are becoming more diverse in their socioeconomic backgrounds, prior educational preparation, motivations, and expectations (Keller, 2001). This is one reason faculty members must use a range of teaching strategies and research (Rice et al., 2000), know how to support and advise students, facilitate learning through discussions and research, utilize a range of collaborative and other innovative learning pro-

cesses, and link classroom learning with life experiences, cultural backgrounds and service in the community (AACU, 1995).

The reward for faculty to be knowledgeable about diversity in working with students and for institutional commitment in valuing diversity is an enriched and potentially transformative educational experience (Gaff, 1997). Today's colleges and universities are increasingly encouraged by external constituencies to strengthen undergraduate education by shifting from an emphasis on teaching to an emphasis on learning. Focusing on the learner, rather than the teacher, leads to new expectations for how faculty members will carry out their roles in diversity settings (Barr and Tagg, 1995). In many situations, researching material on diversity or just by merely talking with students of diverse cultural backgrounds may help faculty. However, this alone will not provide the required knowledge to understand the details and complexities in diversity, even to the best-intentioned and most willing teacher (Rueda and DeNeve, 1999). A possible solution to this barrier is to systematically prepare the faculty member to understand, accept, and share his/her value of diversity with students.

Though much research has been done to highlight knowledge possessed by students, faculty, and employers on diversity (Moll et al., 1992; Villegas and Lucas, 2002), the role of faculty and the institutional environment and commitment require special attention as they constitute the requisite structures for program success in the classroom. Faculty should bring to the classroom skills, abilities, ideas, and practices that should empower his or her students as well as draw on their differences to achieve greater pedagogical impact (Mujtaba and Mujtaba, 2004). Rueda and DeNeve (1999) also noted that while the cultural demographics of faculty members remain relatively unwavering, that of students may be highly variable, and their communication styles, background knowledge, and limited experiences may be different from that of faculty. This divergence can be an impediment to bridging disparities in the classroom.

Bowen (2002) outlined changes that are imperative if faculty members of agricultural education programs are to address diversity. These included the delineation of a number of recommendations that

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would lead to higher levels of appreciation for diversity and more proactive behavior in diversity situations. Similarly, the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) published National Standards for Teacher Education in Agriculture which demanded among other strategies that “the agricultural education teacher preparation program demonstrates and promotes an ongoing commitment to diversity with the expectations that faculty and staff of the program represent the diversity of the region/area served” (AAAE, 2001, Standard 7). When faculty members actively acknowledge and address diversity, their efforts may not initially yield results, but the associated diversity benefits to the institution will eventually become apparent. Benefits take time to be accomplished and that accomplishment depends on how willing instructors are to persevere toward that goal.

Several reviews have been published about how racial and ethnic diversity within post secondary education provides educational benefits for undergraduates (Hurtado et al., 2003; Milem 2003; Milem and Hakuta, 2000). This research shows that these benefits are far ranging and span from individual students, faculty and institutions to private enterprise, the economy, and the broader society. The effectiveness of university programs at successfully engaging students with issues on diversity depends to a much larger extent on the institutional context within which it is operationalized and commitment to the educational value of diversity (Gurin et al., 2002). Milem and Hakuta (2000) noted that higher perceived levels of institutional commitment to diversity are associated with higher reported college grade-point averages and increases in personal goals to promote racial understanding.

Do agricultural education programs conceptualize diversity as an important issue today? How do institutions infuse diversity into their programs and what is their scope of commitment? This study was carried out to investigate these questions. Institutional commitment can be shown in the way faculty view and incorporate diversity in their teaching assignments and from the assessment of the programs offered to get students involved in diversity issues.

Methods

The population was the 86 teacher education programs in agricultural education at postsecondary institutions within the United States. These included all 1862 and 1890 land grant universities and many state

universities with agriculture colleges/departments. The questionnaire was revised from one developed by Wakefield and Talbert (1999), which established content and face validity through a panel review of experts consisting of agricultural education faculty, faculty teaching multicultural education, and members of the researchers' university Department of African American Studies. Construct validity for the 2005 survey was ascertained based on the results obtained from the 1998 survey and on theory relating to diversity and teacher preparedness, while face validity was ascertained through expert opinion on the revised version of the 1998 survey instrument.

Because of cost, time, and convenience to the respondents a web-based questionnaire was used instead of a mailed questionnaire; however, respondents were mailed a letter explaining the research. The questionnaire was posted to a Zoomerang™ website in February of 2005. Follow-ups occurred approximately every two weeks including sending a second letter, making telephone calls, and e-mailing non-respondents. In June, a printed version of the questionnaire was mailed to all non-respondents as a final follow up. By July 2005, 57 out of 86 agricultural education programs had responded, giving a 66% response rate. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Using a five-section questionnaire, three of which are included in this study, university agricultural education programs were surveyed. Through a Web-based survey, the agricultural education programs were asked to provide information on whether their department/institution prepared their faculty to be able to effectively function in diversity-related situations. The section on faculty preparation toward diversity issues included questions designed to

Table 1. Preparation of New and Current Faculty to Teach in Diverse Situations

Response	Frequency		Percentage	
	Provided for New Faculty	Provided for Current Faculty	Provided for New Faculty	Provided for Current Faculty
Mandatory workshop in Diversity				
Yes	14	7	25	13
No	39	44	68	80
Not Sure	4	4	7	7
Total	57	55	100	100
Optional workshop in Diversity				
Yes	29	31	51	56
No	26	22	46	40
Not Sure	2	2	4	4
Total	57	55	101	100
Diversity related Statements in correspondences				
Yes	43	41	75	75
No	10	10	18	18
Not Sure	4	4	7	7
Total	57	55	100	100
Diversity in teacher education topics				
Yes	48	48	86	87
No	5	7	9	13
Not Sure	3	0	5	0
Total	56	55	100	100
Diversity encouraged as focus area in research				
Yes	28	30	51	57
No	21	18	38	34
Not Sure	6	5	11	9
Total	55	53	100	100

discover the types of experiences and preparation provided for new and current faculty to teach diverse college students and to prepare those students to teach or work in diverse situations. The section on research included questions designed to discover the types of research projects that were conducted on teaching and working in diverse situations by both newly employed and continuing faculty.

Results and Discussion

One-fourth of the responding programs required new faculty to participate in a diversity workshop while approximately one-eighth required the same of current faculty (Table 1). A majority of the universities do provide optional departmental/institution workshops in diversity, pluralism, or multiculturalism for their new and current faculty. Three-fourths of the responding programs encouraged new and current faculty to use diversity-related statements on correspondences and publications. When discussing teacher education topics or issues, a majority reported they encouraged diversity to be considered. About one-half encouraged diversity as a research focus area for both new and current faculty.

Regarding workshops as a means for preparing faculty in the area of diversity, most agricultural education programs do not engage their faculty in either mandatory or optional workshops. This raises the question of the level of commitment of the institutions to diversity issues. All faculty members should view diversity education as part of their mission. But, where should the onus for diversity preparation reside, with the individual faculty member or the institution? Voluntary exposure to diversity in the form of workshops or seminars appears to be inadequate in preparing all faculty for diversity.

Greater importance is given to diversity-related statements in correspondences/publications and discussions regarding teacher education topics. Seventy-five percent of the responding programs encourage this form of diversity communication. The results in Table 1 therefore indicate that these institutions in the United States have become cognizant of the importance of diversity in both new and current faculty development and are taking the appropriate steps in providing the needed encouragement. Providing diversity-related statements in correspondences could help spread the news about university engagement in the issue, which may trigger interest and/or awareness in the recipients of such correspondences.

Almost 30% of the responding agricultural education programs have faculty members who

conducted research on gender issues (Table 2). The table also shows that 26.5% of the agricultural education programs have faculty members who conducted research on ethnicity and race issues. Another 20% have faculty who conducted research on special needs learners. Table 2 also shows that 23% of the agricultural education programs have faculty who conducted research on non-traditional students. These results suggest that though there is faculty involvement in diversity research, the scale and scope is still minimal as less than a third of faculty are engaged in each of the four categories delineated in the table. A departmental commitment to diversity, without encouragement and support of the activities of its faculty members, is not sufficient to engage faculty in diversity research. The recruitment and hiring of faculty with expertise in diversity and incentives for faculty to engage in high quality research in diversity will put this commitment into action.

Table 2. Research Conducted by Faculty on Diversity and Special Needs Learners

	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Gender Issues	Yes	15	29.4
	No	36	70.6
	Total	51	100
Ethnicity/Race Issues	Yes	13	26.5
	No	36	73.5
	Total	49	100
Special Needs Learners	Yes	10	20
	No	40	80
	Total	50	100
Other Underrepresented Populations (religious, urban, etc.)	Yes	11	23
	No	37	77
	Total	48	100

Doctoral students, and to a lesser extent masters students, are potential future faculty members. In Table 3, 22% of the responding agricultural education programs had MS graduate students who conducted research on gender issues compared to 4.5% for doctoral students. Table 3 also shows that 16.3% of the agricultural education programs had MS graduate students who conducted research on ethnicity and race issues compared to 6.7% for doctoral students. Another 12.5% had MS graduate students who conducted research on special needs learners compared to 4.5% for doctoral students. Only 2% of the responding agricultural education programs had MS graduate students who conducted research on other underrepresented populations compared to 4.5% of doctoral students. The limited number of doctoral students conducting diversity-related research may indicate that few new faculty members in the near future will develop lines of inquiry in diversity. The slightly higher percentage of MS students conducting such research may hold promise for an increased emphasis further in the future.

Table 3. Research Conducted by Graduate Students on Diversity and Special Needs Learners

Response	Masters		Doctoral	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Gender Issues				
Yes	11	22	2	4.5
No	39	78	43	95.5
Total	50	100	45	100
Ethnicity/Race Issues				
Yes	8	16.3	3	6.7
No	41	83.7	42	93.3
Total	49	100	45	100
Special Needs Learners				
Yes	6	12.5	2	4.5
No	42	87.5	43	95.5
Total	48	100	45	100
Other Underrepresented Populations (religious, urban, etc.)				
Yes	1	2.2	3	6.8
No	45	97.8	41	93.2
Total	46	100	44	100

Summary

This exploratory study gauged the degree to which agricultural education programs were preparing their faculty to work with diverse populations. Less than one-third of the responding institutions reported faculty members conducting research on any of the issues related to diversity. Although this is an improvement in the percentage of research conducted in the Wakefield and Talbert (1999) study, it still shows an indication of much room for improvement. Issues related to diversity are crucial to education and as such should have at least one agricultural education faculty member at virtually all U.S. institutions conducting diversity-related research. This would provide a critical mass of diversity researchers in order to move forward on significant issues.

While recognizing agricultural education programs are encouraging diversity-related statements in correspondences and publications, this is not sufficient as less than one-fourth of responding institutions reported new and current faculty members are required to attend a workshop on diversity. Although at least half reported optional workshops on diversity are available, it is unknown how many faculty members attend the workshops. If new and current faculty members are presently not receiving adequate preparation, then the need for instruction and experiences in diversity for faculty in agricultural education cannot be overemphasized. It is recommended therefore that the professional association, American Association for Agricultural Education, emphasize an institutional context of diversity in university agricultural education programs by encouraging and supporting diversity through in-service trainings and the inclusion in the

mission and goals of agricultural education departments a commitment to the educational value of diversity.

For the infusion of diversity into teaching and classrooms, faculty members need to have a clear understanding of the philosophy and practice of diversity. Moreover, in order to involve faculty members in diversity education, the university or the department should be supportive and committed to creating an inclusive and diverse environment. The university, college, or department (depending on institution size) should create a diversity coordinator position, build diversity into position descriptions for faculty hires, provide diversity training for graduate teaching assistants, and develop undergraduate and/or

graduate courses on diversity. Faculty release time to develop diversity courses or to incorporate diversity education into existing courses is one means of demonstrating institutional commitment. Faculty members should be encouraged to use diversity as pedagogy by working with diverse community partners. In addition, faculty members should align diversity outcomes with program goals and appropriate state and national standards.

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