

Developing and Offering a Course on the History of a College of Agriculture



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Abstract

Students frequently have little background of the history of the college of agriculture in which they are enrolled. An understanding of this history can be useful for student appreciation of dynamics on their campus, as well as the importance of land-grant philosophies and contributions of colleges of agriculture to society as a whole. The background, content, and student response related to a course on the history of a college of agriculture are discussed in this article. Results of the initial offering of the course have been positive.

Introduction

Fields et al. (2003) have summarized many key issues for the future of higher education in agriculture and related disciplines. Schools and colleges are addressing significant increases in student diversity through the development of new majors, the implementation of different student recruitment techniques, and changes in teaching and learning approaches (Fields et al., 2003, Wildman and Torres, 2002). As students enrolled in land grant colleges become more diverse (Dyer et al., 1999), they also bring with them a less well-defined understanding of the land-grant system and its origin. For example, over the last three years, during new student orientation to our College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CAES) at the University of Georgia (UGA), students are told that they are now enrolled at a land-grant university. Out of approximately 600 incoming freshmen in the last three years, only one was able to correctly answer the question "What is a land-grant university?" and she was the daughter of a cooperative extension agent in our state.

According to a report from the National Academy of Sciences (1996), the future of land grant colleges will depend on how colleges respond to significant changes taking place in all aspects of their mission and their clientele. An understanding of the traditional role of land grant colleges, including the history of agriculture and of the land grant university system, is critical to the future of these colleges.

The Albert R. Mann Library at Cornell University has an electronic collection of the core historical literature of agriculture. In highlighting the value of this collection, the library has indicated the value of understanding United States history by

including its rural life and agricultural heritage. The library mentions the centrality of agriculture to the American experience, how agriculture has shaped cultural values, and its value in understanding our country's economic, social, scientific, and technical experiences (Albert R. Mann Library, 2005).

Many undergraduate students in colleges of agriculture are not aware of the rich history of agriculture in their state or region, or of the land-grant system of the United States. Students' understanding of these issues is important in helping ensure their support of agriculture and the land-grant system in the future. Within this broader context, students' understanding of the specific history of their own college can help them make sense of campus politics, policies, and prejudices, and can provide a foundation for their support of the future growth and development of our colleges.

Based on the rationale presented above, the author developed a course on the history of his college, the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CAES) at the University of Georgia. The course is discussed in detail in this article.

Course Background and Information Resources

Several years ago a group of student leaders in CAES expressed to the college teaching administration a desire for a course on the history of the college. The students knew that agriculture had played a critical role in the evolution of the University of Georgia from a private institution chartered in 1785 to its current status as a publicly supported land-grant university (Dyer, 1985). They were concerned the university as a whole was unaware of the role that CAES had played in the larger history of the institution, and as a result the larger university community was not as supportive of the college as it should be. The students wanted to improve their understanding of CAES history to help them be better representatives of the college (both on- and off-campus) and to prepare them as they moved into political roles on campus.

As the course was being developed, the author conducted a search to determine if other courses on the history of a specific college of agriculture were offered. A number of colleges and universities offer courses on the history of agriculture, including

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History of Agriculture and the Environment at Harvard University, Agricultural History at Southwest Missouri State University, American Agriculture and Rural Life at Washington State University, and *The Agricultural World: Land, Food, Sustainability* at Simon's Rock College (Great Barrington, MA). Iowa State University has a Graduate Program in Agricultural History and Rural Studies, and UC-Davis has an Agricultural History Center. The journal, *Agricultural History*, provides further background information, and the online core historical literature of agriculture (Mann Library, 2005) has 1,834 books available on agricultural history.

Relevant publications on the history of higher education in America include the *History of Higher Education Annual* and books such as *The History of Higher Education* (Goodchild and Wechsler, 1997) and *A History of American Higher Education* (Thelin, 2004). The origin, development, and role of the land-grant system are covered in detail in many of these publications. Many universities and colleges with large history departments offer courses on higher education history that also include discussions on the concept and implementation of the land-grant system. Regional and university presses frequently publish books on the history of a university that contain useful information about the role of the college of agriculture and the land-grant origins. Publications on the specific history of a number of colleges of agriculture are available, as are histories of departments, and archived notes from distinguished faculty and administrators (eg., Colman, 1963; Howell and Odell, 1989; Lockmiller, 1939; Miller, 1979; Ousley, 1935; Ross, 1942; Schweider, 1993; Van Overbeek, 1982; Willard, 1940; Zellar and Wyatt, 1999). Combining these types of resources together provides the material necessary to create a course that deals with the history of agriculture in a given state or region and then address the local history of a specific college of agriculture. We infrequently take advantage of the opportunity to provide this information in a contemporary context to our current undergraduate students.

Course Development

The initial course design focused almost exclusively on the history of the college. However, as course planning took place, the need for an understanding of broader historical issues became obvious. Among these issues were the history of agriculture in the region, from Native American practices to the initial establishment of experimental gardens by the first European settlers, through transitions into and out of slavery, and to more modern developments in agriculture. Including the history of our own university was important for students to appreciate the context in which the college was established. Of particular value was the concept that, when our college was founded in 1859,

university faculty generally taught philosophy, the classics, and theology. Throughout the country these faculty and many agriculturalists and farmers were convinced that agriculture was an experiential discipline with no scientific basis. The struggle to have agriculture treated as a science was important, and these issues were included in the class.

Course Objectives

The objectives of the course were for students to:

1. Become familiar with the history of agricultural production in the region and state.
2. Understand the origins of the university.
3. Understand the historical relationship of the Morrill Act and the college of agriculture to the university as a whole.
4. Learn the national roots of the land-grant university, the state experiment station system, and the cooperative extension service, as well as the national and state origins of 4-H and FFA.
5. Learn about the college of agriculture, the origin of various departments and student clubs.
6. Learn about life in the college and the university through various sources, including alumni.
7. Learn about the organization of the college, the specific administrative positions, and become acquainted with the individuals in college administration.

Course Format, Content and Activities

The course was established as a one-credit elective course that has been taught as a special topics class. The class met for one 50-minute class period each of the 15 weeks of the semester. Students received a letter grade in the class. Because interactions among students in class were an important component of the course, 35% of the grade was based on attendance and class participation. The remaining 65% of the course grade was based on the quality of four student activities.

To help the students begin to think in historical terms, and to appreciate the value of historical events to their lives, pairs of students were assigned a specific week in the semester and were required to research important history of our state that had taken place during that week. At the beginning of each class period, the team was asked to share three important events in the history of the state and to describe why the events were important.

An additional example of historical issues that impact students was the origin of the university mascot, school colors, symbols, and songs. Students were intrigued when they learned that the tune for our university's alma mater song was borrowed from a Cornell University song, which in turn had been borrowed from an English folk song about a young woman dying of tuberculosis. The original English lyrics and tune were played in class from a recording of the Cornell Men's Glee Club.

Developing and Offering

Physical History Activity - the Scavenger Hunt

Many of the older facilities of our campuses have connections to colleges of agriculture. Especially when these facilities are no longer used by the college, or have different function within the college, students can benefit from understanding the original purpose of these facilities. Through old photographs and other materials, students learned about various gardens, buildings, camps, and other facilities that had been a part of the college but had been torn down or moved. A number of buildings on our campus were originally constructed for a specific use by the college and now serve a different purpose. In some cases these buildings are still part of our college, and in other instances they are used by other parts of the university. To help students explore the college's physical history, each student in the class received a digital photograph of a portion of a building or other campus feature with a connection to the college. The students were then required to conduct a scavenger hunt to locate this feature and to prepare a report on the feature's significance to the college's history. Hints were available at a 5% discount for the grade of the activity.

Student Life Activity - Pandora's Box

To help make history more relevant to the students, a student life activity was created that required students to learn about historical interests and activities of students on campus. The university's student yearbook served as a resource for this activity, which was named after the yearbook's name, *The Pandora*. Pairs of students were responsible for a decade from the 1850s to the 1970s. They were required to locate old yearbooks and other materials from the library and answered the following questions for a class presentation:

- What is your overall impression of student life in that decade?
- What were the overriding themes?
- What were important issues on campus?
- What is most significantly different from current student life?
- What is most significantly the same?

Additional insights into student life were provided through videotaped interviews of alumni from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Portions of these taped interviews were played periodically throughout the course.

College Administrative Structure Activity

Many colleges of agriculture have complex administrative structures that are poorly understood by students. At many institutions, including our own, a sizeable number of college administrators are involved in activities other than resident instruction. Students are not familiar with their responsibilities

and often do not have opportunities to interact with these individuals. An organizational chart of the college with administrative titles but not the names of the individuals holding these positions was presented to the class. Each student was required to sign up for a specific administrative title in the college. Their assignment was to determine the name of the individual and then schedule a personal interview with the administrator. As a template for the interview, students were encouraged to ask:

- What are the overall responsibilities of the person/position?
- What background does this person bring to the position (academic training & discipline, prior experience, etc.)?
- Why is this individual in this position (how did they get the job, what do they like about it, what don't they like, etc.)?

Students then reported back to the class on the duties, responsibilities, and personality of the individual.

College of the Future Activity

For this group activity, the students were asked to respond to critics of the land-grant concept with a restructuring of our state's land-grant university to create a 21st century state-assisted college designed with the philosophy of the Morrill Act. As background context for this activity, we related to students that, according some, the need to promote "the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes" (primarily the children of farmers) as mentioned in the act creating land-grant universities, is no longer necessary. These critics point out that there are very few children of farmers anymore, that across the country there are low enrollments in many of the traditional agriculturally related disciplines, and that agriculture is sufficiently productive that significant resources no longer need to be allocated to research and extension activities. Because of all these issues, critics charge that either colleges of agriculture no longer need to exist, or they should be dramatically restructured to meet the future needs of people in the land-grant tradition (Kellogg Commission, 2000).

For this activity, students were reminded to consider the overall significance of the land-grant university, including the Morrill, Hatch, and Smith-Lever Acts, and their overall purposes. In this project, they were required to:

- Name the college
- Chose a location within the state
- Describe the disciplines to be included
- Develop an overall structure
- Decide what majors would be offered
- Indicate significant research emphases (if any)
- Indicate significant extension emphases (if any)

Results and Discussion

Student response to the class was positive. The first time the course was offered as a special topics class, publicity was generated through posting of flyers, emails to advisors, and discussions with student leaders. There were 27 students in the initial class. Feedback from students was obtained through both midterm and end-of-course evaluations. All 27 students said they would take the course again, and that they would recommend it to friends, even those who were not enrolled in our college. Students were asked if this, an experimental class, should be taught again, and all 27 responded positively. Thirteen students thought the course should be expanded and offered as a two-credit course for additional credit or in a two-semester sequence.

Students appreciated the various projects. They recommended more emphasis on recent history and suggested inclusion of more interactive projects, such as campus walks to view and talk about physical history, interviews of older alumni, and history games (using a format such as Jeopardy).

The scavenger hunt was especially popular. One student who had a particularly difficult time identifying the building in her scavenger hunt photo commented, "I was tailgating before our last home football game. I looked up and realized I was looking at the building in my scavenger hunt assignment. I yelled to my friends that I finally got an A on the project. This is the first time I've ever completed a class assignment while I was tailgating before a football game. This is a great class!" In addition to the scavenger hunt, students singled out the videotape segments from alumni as an especially interesting and valuable part of the course. They encouraged the instructor to invite alumni on occasion to join future classes and reminisce about their experiences.

Students were also able to use the knowledge gained from this course in a highly practical context. One example involves the university's coliseum, which was originally built to serve as an agricultural exposition hall. When a student-organized professional rodeo was moved from the coliseum, students from this class used their knowledge of the history of this building to stage protests to university officials, reminding them of the initial intent of the building's use. Although the protests were not successful, students gained valuable political experience in the process. One student from the class met, by invitation, with the governor of our state on this issue.

Conclusion

Students reacted positively to this course. With relatively little adjustment, its overall outline, as well as its various projects, could be adapted to any college of agriculture. The author encourages others to consider a similar course be initiated at other colleges of agriculture.

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