

Opinion

Preaching Beyond The Choir

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When two Ag faculty get together nowadays, one topic sure to come up is the diminishing status of agriculture, real or perceived, on many Land-Grant University campuses. Complaints will be heard that agriculture gets snubbed by administrators and that most college students don't know, or even care to know, about the very sector of our society that provides them the abundance of food and fiber they depend upon for their privileged lifestyle. Even some Ag students seem hesitant to tell new friends their major for fear it will make them the brunt of endless jokes.

In defense, we decry their ignorance and tout the virtues of agriculture to each other, but we're only "preaching to the choir." Ironically, those who complain the most are usually the least likely to step outside their office to do anything about it - often lamenting that "nothing can be done." Well, there are things that can be done, but like most things worth doing, they take time and effort. It takes time to get yet more involved, and it takes effort to rekindle an understanding of agriculture and regain the campus-wide respect that agriculture still so richly deserves.

To foster renewed respect on today's campuses, there are many things we can do internally such as: 1) maintain current, rigorous, science-based curricula, 2) avoid polarizing "us vs. them" confrontations and 3) justify our continuing existence on needs for the future - not traditions from the past. More importantly, however, we must send a positive, informative message outward to those who eat food everyday but don't understand where it comes from or what it takes to get it on their table.

One quick way to spread the message of agriculture throughout main campus is to reestablish Ag faculty as valuable assets to the student body as a whole. Not just as teachers of Ag courses that the majority of students across campus will never take, but as caring adult role models and advisors for mainstream student activities. Most college students are naturally curious about things they've heard about but don't really understand. Agriculture is a prime

example. By simply interacting with non-agriculture students, to the point where they feel comfortable talking with you socially, it won't be long before they start asking questions like, "What's the difference between a buffalo and a bison?" and "Can pigs swim?" Interesting and educational discussions about agriculture will follow. The trick is getting yourself into a setting where students feel free to ask those kinds of questions. On every campus, there are numerous opportunities just waiting for Ag faculty to get involved and, through that involvement, teach students about the importance of agriculture in their everyday lives.

Where to begin? If you want to get the attention of students, find out what's on their minds and what their needs are, then help them meet those needs - hopefully in a way you can tie to agriculture. Just the fact that you're from agriculture and you're willing to help will build positive relationships. As an example, student organizations are always looking for faculty willing to give brief presentations on relatively generic topics such as time management and leadership. One or two "canned" presentations and a personable stage presence will garner many invitations to speak before student groups where you can use agricultural examples in your talk. Another simple way to be of value to students from all corners of campus is simply understanding how the "system" works at your institution. Knowing the basics, like how to change majors and how to get into a class that's full, will be of great value to students year after year. Students will remember your concern and willingness to help, and your reputation for caring will transcend academic boundaries.

Regardless of specific opportunities, have a positive, helping attitude and be willing to give of your time. Students are always seeking faculty willing to advise their clubs and organizations, serve on selection committees, and endless other activities (some are discussed below). Even something as benign as judging homecoming floats, usually coordinated by the student government association, can endear you to a group of highly influential student leaders. Once word gets out that you have a good attitude and are willing to get involved, invitations will roll in from all corners of campus!

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Many Ag faculty are involved in their department and college new-student orientation programs, but getting involved at the university level gives you exposure to a much broader spectrum of impressionable students. Let your admissions office and orientation program director know that you are available to visit with and help incoming students and that you are willing to assist them in any way. Ag faculty have a well-deserved reputation for treating guests like family, and visiting families are usually highly impressed with the professional and caring way in which they are treated by Ag faculty during such visits. In addition, more and more universities are offering first-year experience courses to introduce new students to campus life, university resources, etc. Although instructors are expected to include certain topics within their course, they usually are free to present this information within the context of their own discipline.

Many of us willingly advise student clubs and organizations within our college. While this is a very important and rewarding activity, our involvement again is often limited to "the choir." To increase your presence across campus, be willing to devote additional time outside of your college. Take time to find out what campus clubs and organizations are respected by the students themselves, then express an interest and willingness to get involved. Examples include Freshman Forum, Mortar Board and Omicron Delta Kappa, just to name a few. Also, many student selection committees include seats for faculty representation and input. Volunteering to serve on such committees proves that Ag faculty care about students and time-honored traditions of the student body. Opportunities abound on most campuses.

If students value an activity enough to participate in or attend themselves, they'll appreciate support shown by faculty. Scan campus events in the student paper, and listen to what students are talking about. If you have a varsity athlete in class, go to their event and watch them compete. If you have an interest in music, attend student recitals. If you have an eye for art, go to student exhibits. It always seems to surprise art majors (and art instructors, for that matter) that someone in agriculture might enjoy the visual and performing arts. Your attendance at their event reminds them, and their friends, that Ag faculty are members of the greater university family. Likewise, interactions with alumni should extend beyond your own former students. University alumni associations often sponsor activities at which faculty representatives give presentations to or field questions from alumni. Alumni are eager to hear any news of their alma mater, and in most cases the faculty speaker is given free reign to address whatever campus-related topics they wish, including what's happening within their own department and college.

We also need to let the rest of campus know that

agriculture still attracts quality students. It's natural for us to encourage talented Ag students to become active in departmental and college clubs and activities. However, we need to encourage our students to get involved and represent agriculture campus-wide, as well. Areas include: student government, leadership programs, the Greek system, honorary societies, student ambassador programs, student recruiters, campus tour guides, new-student program counselors, etc. It is important that we make every effort to nominate deserving Ag students for campus-wide recognition (Phi Kappa Phi, Mortar Board, etc.) to showcase our students and our programs to the rest of campus.

With some thought, you can find hundreds of fun ways to give agriculture renewed visibility and appreciation on your campus. One sure way is to play our "trump card" - baby farm animals - wherever and whenever possible (with IACUC approval, of course)! Urban-reared college students are drawn to baby farm animals because they are "so cute", and most students are very curious about animals they've only read about or seen on TV. In graduate school, I befriended a neighbor who happened to teach figure drawing at the university. I volunteered to bring baby farm animals to his drawing class once a week and to instruct the art students on how to care for each animal while there. The babies were a BIG hit with the art students (lambs and pigs were their favorites), and they learned a lot about what it takes to care for farm animals (not house-trained, of course)! Let your imagination go. Most any discipline within agriculture can use farm animals as a "hook" to get the attention of non-ag students.

On a final note, faculty who get involved with students across campus often receive university-wide student-sponsored awards which bring further recognition to their college and department. You must, however, be willing to devote time and effort, and it certainly helps if your Department Head/Chair and College Dean share your belief that these main-campus activities are important. One warning - select your spokes people wisely. The wrong person with the wrong attitude can do far more damage than ten people can repair. The right people with the right attitude can breath new life into agriculture and its reputation on today's Land-Grant University campuses.