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Working with the Agricultural Diversity of College Students

An agriculture undergraduate student confided in me a comment she had heard from an agriculture instructor at my institution: “The West was not won by organics.” The joke was not well received by the student, who favored organic and free-range agriculture. They felt marginalized from that point forward. This teaching-tips article will provide a basic overview of the issues involved in agricultural diversity along with some tips on how to work with diverse agriculture college students.

Introduction

Diversity in agriculture can include a variety of ideas. Many think of diversity in education as involving issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc. as well as the field of multicultural education (i.e., Banks and Banks, 2010; Vang, 2010). These are important areas of diversity in agriculture; however, there is also diversity of ideas, which can include a variety of agriculture topics. Many in agriculture can recognize these ideas and the conflicting values attached to each: organic agriculture, chemical agriculture, free-range agriculture, community-supported agriculture, confinements, small-scale farming and family farms, to name a handful of them (i.e., Conway, 2012; Miller and Conko, 2004; Murphy, 2004; Rodale, 2010; Vallianatos, 2006). These issues are important in agriculture and shape how people talk about agriculture. I am not suggesting that an instructor needs to be an expert and advocate for positions within these various topics; rather, the tips listed below require an instructor to be more of a moderator than an expert. The goal is to create a classroom community of respect that will lead to learning between students beyond the walls of the classroom or lecture hall.

Procedure

These tips are written in a list format to keep the ideas succinct.

1. Refrain from making derogatory jokes, remarks and slurs. This includes comments about agricultural beliefs and practices.

2. Take a few minutes at the start of the course to explain what your agricultural values are (for example, family farming or conventional). Explain to your class that your viewpoints come from this position and you do not mean to offend anyone who might have conflicting values.

3. Lay out discussion ground rules for everyone in class that emphasize individuality and respect. I say something to the effect of, “Everyone has an opinion and it should be respected. You can respectfully agree or disagree with it.”

4. Encourage students to share their own viewpoints, even if they contradict yours.

5. When students begin to have a discussion that presents conflicting agricultural ideas, be sure to guide the discussion in a positive direction. Comments such as, “You both bring up interesting points…” can help keep the room civil. Do not take sides and stop any conversations which become disrespectful.

6. If you notice that only one side of an argument is being discussed, offer an argument agriculture from another viewpoint for discussion.

7. Do not call on students for their opinions on potentially controversial topics unless you know they are willing to share.

8. Always try to emphasize the difference between emotional arguments and factual arguments. These two concepts can be confused in a discussion. Remind students that the difference between the two is important.

9. Do not overvalue or undervalue emotional and factual arguments. It is often difficult for people to separate the two types of arguments. Honestly and respectfully demonstrate the difference between the two. Remember, emotional arguments can be sometimes irrational; yet, they also form the backbone of our identities in agriculture.

10. I prefer to spend the first day of class having students share their ideas and values about agriculture with their classmates. I think this is really important in an agricultural education class, because our field is completely socially-centered. I often bring food or take my students for chips and salsa for the discussion. I want them to feel comfortable with their classmates. I try to elicit their opinions on hot agricultural topics in a conversational style. For me, this particular activity is very important. This activity applies many of the tips from above. It also does not hide from the conflicts within agriculture. Students leave that first day of class feeling more at ease with the class and their classmates.

Assessment

I have conducted both formal and informal assessments of my classes after having used the tips listed above. The course and instructor ratings are high, 4.29-5.00 out of 5.00. My research team has conducted focus groups and interviews with my students about their experiences in the class and virtually all comments have been positive. These generally high marks must be understood within the context of the course. I want to make the students feel uncomfortable and challenge their ideas. The high marks that students give the course after this experience testify to the usefulness of these tips.

I want to share two remarks from students which testify to the learning that occurs in the courses when we bring diversity of agricultural values to the center. A nonconventional agriculture student remarked how she had never heard of grain cooperatives. She found them amazing and quite progressive. She gained respect for this important segment of conventional agriculture. Likewise, a conventional agriculture student had entered my class convinced that using even one acre of ground for something other than food or commodity production was a waste. During the semester, he learned about a student’s passion for growing lavender as well as the uses and profitability of the plant. At the end of the semester this conventional student

told me that he would never grow lavender, but that he now sees the potential for cultivating for such crops. Both of these students, on either end of the agricultural value spectrum, gained an appreciation for the other side, which is all we can hope for in our modern and ever-changing agriculture systems.

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