

Successful Programming for the Recruitment of Underrepresented Student Populations in Agriculture: A Case Study of a Diversity Initiative at an 1862 Land-Grant University

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Abstract

Effective recruitment initiatives for underrepresented student populations interested in pursuing degrees in agricultural-related sciences have the potential to diversify colleges of agriculture while also increasing enrollment. In the current study, we used a qualitative case study approach to examine the effectiveness of the recruitment initiative, called the Ag Fellows Program, designed to attract underrepresented populations to agricultural-related majors. The case was bounded by time and place; for instance, we analyzed the outcomes from the Ag Fellows Program from Fall 2021 and 2022 cohorts at an 1862 Land-Grant University. As a result, the underrepresented student populations reported lacking information about the agricultural industry before the Ag Fellows Program and perceived that agriculture was limited to farming, ranching, and other related careers. Further, they indicated that academic interests, financial aid, and an amiable atmosphere were influential factors when deciding to pursue a degree in agricultural-related sciences. As a result, we recommend conducting additional research to evaluate the effectiveness of other strategic programming initiatives designed by colleges of agriculture to attract more educated, diverse employees into the agricultural workforce.

Introduction and Review of Literature

Limited research has been conducted on the recruitment of underrepresented populations in U.S. colleges of agriculture. To complicate this issue further, the 2017 Census of Agriculture reported that 95.4% of farm producers in the U.S. were White/non-Hispanic (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2018). However, trends published by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) documented a shift in the racial and ethnic distribution of students populating public schools in the U.S. over the last two decades (Aud et al., 2012). As a result, the racial makeup of the agricultural industry has been predicted to have an influx of individuals identifying as a racial minority (Alston et al., 2019, 2020).

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Efforts to recruit underrepresented populations will be critical, considering that in 2050, the global population is expected to exceed 9 billion people (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2023). Therefore, the agricultural industry will be responsible for providing more food, feed, fiber, and biofuel feedstock than ever before; consequently, the recruitment and retention of a skilled workforce will become even more critical (FAO, 2023). On this point, The FAO (2023) estimated that 40% of the global workforce was involved in agricultural labor. However, the agricultural workforce will need to significantly increase the number of individuals employed in the industry to meet the demands of a growing world population. In the U.S., universities have been called to meet this challenge by preparing students to navigate an increasingly globalized economy that requires them to interact and build professional relationships with individuals who hold different racial and sociocultural identities from themselves (Platt, 2004; Soler et al., 2022). In response, the current investigation examined a strategy implemented by the Louisiana State University (LSU) College of Agriculture that aimed to attract underrepresented populations to agricultural-related majors, including (a) racial minorities, (b) low-socio-economic students, (c) individuals representing the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and other genders and sexualities (LGBTQ+) community, and (d) first-generation college students. Consequently, it was critical to describe how each underrepresented student population has been situated in the landscape of higher education.

Racially Diverse Students

In U.S. higher education, racial minority students often represent individuals who identify as non-White and include African Americans, Alaskan Natives, Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, Latin Americans/Hispanics, multiracial, Native American students (Burke, 2020). Racial minority student populations have been found to be less likely to attend four-year universities because of negative historical associations, sociodemographic factors, and other educational barriers (Beyl et al., 2016). Such findings have fueled calls for new, innovative recruitment approaches to increase the enrollment and graduation rates of students representing racial minority groups (Alston et al., 2020; Drape et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2020). As such, U.S. colleges of agriculture must promote opportunities that can shift racial minority students' perceptions of the agricultural industry (Hobbs et al., 2023). For example, Hobbs et al. (2023) called for colleges of agriculture to feature degree opportunities and programming that better align with racial minorities' career aspirations and educational plans.

Prospective college students from racial minority communities may also lack an understanding of the mission and purpose of colleges of agriculture (Alston et al., 2019). On this point, Jones and Larke (2001) argued that there was a lack of racial minority professionals in agriculture who could serve as role models for students representing these populations. As a result, it was recommended that colleges of agriculture use alumni who represent these populations to serve as valuable assets in the recruitment and retention of racial minority students (Allen et al., 2022; Jones & Larke, 2001). Minority racial groups have also been found to be more likely to experience multidimensional poverty than their White counterparts (Reeves et al., 2016). Race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status have also demonstrated statistically significant differences regarding access to community resources (Williams et al., 2010).

Students of Low Socioeconomic Status

Students of low socioeconomic status (SES) come from financially disadvantaged households, which makes enrollment in post-secondary institutions more challenging for this population due to costs associated with student fees, food, housing, tuition, and other related financial burdens (Wyner et al., 2022). Choy (2000) explained that *financial need* was an umbrella term that described the financial burden of attending a post-secondary institution and what the student was expected to pay based on the family's financial circumstances. To offset this burden, low SES students often require *financial aid* through scholarships or grants, which can help offset the cost of postsecondary education (Choy et al., 2000).

A comparison of enrollment rates of two-year community colleges and four-year universities found that over the past three decades, the U.S. higher education system has grown almost exclusively in the

community college sector (Long & Kurlaender, 2009). This growth has been attributed to two-year institutions that have provided more affordable options for low-SES students (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Rehr et al., 2022). It has also been found that low SES students attending four-year colleges were far less likely to graduate with a bachelor's degree than students attending colleges due to budgetary constraints (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011). Low SES students have also been reported to be less likely to utilize opportunities for collegiate organizational engagement, which negatively affects their retention (Rehr et al., 2022). As such, students from a low SES background often exhibit financial burdens that require economic solutions to be successful in university settings (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Rehr et al., 2022).

LGBTQ+ Students

LGBTQ+ students also face distinctive challenges in colleges of agriculture (Elliot-Engel et al., 2019). For example, due to the lack of representation of LGBTQ+ students, Gray (2009) reported that colleges of agriculture students often perceive that individuals from this population have not historically been present in the industry or, in some instances, feel they have no place. In recent years, collegiate student organizations have begun to offer LGBTQ+ student support during their academic careers. A specific organization supporting LGBTQ+ students in agriculture is the Cultivating Change Collegiate Affiliate Program (CAP). Despite such progress, however, Murray et al. (2020) critiqued the lack of empirical studies in agriculture that seek to understand the needs of LGBTQ+ youth, especially regarding the support needed for this population to be successful.

Perhaps the lack of empirical evidence on the LGBTQ+ community in the peer-refereed literature in agriculture speaks to the lack of representation and opportunities for this population in the industry (Murray et al., 2020). On this point, Granché (2021) reported that gay males did not perceive agriculture as a space that valued diversity regarding individuals' sexual identity. Further, Elliot-Engel et al. (2019) found that LGBTQ+ students were more likely to consider leaving their university than their peers because they perceived they did not belong. These experiences and perspectives, therefore, create significant challenges for the recruitment and retention of LGBTQ+ students in colleges of agriculture.

First-Generation College Students

First-generation college students face many challenges in higher education (Irlbeck et al., 2014). This underrepresented group has been defined as a student whose parents have earned a high school diploma or less (Taylor & Bicak, 2020). Irlbeck et al. (2014) reported that one in six students fit the definition of a first-generation college student. Typically belonging to working-class families, first-generation college students often represent a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Irlbeck et al., 2014). Individuals identifying as first-generation college students have been reported to be more likely to (a) begin at a community college, (b) attend college part-time, (c) live off campus, (d) delay entering college after high school, and/or (e) work full time (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004; Inman et al., 1999). Further, to successfully support first-generation college students, colleges of agriculture must be prepared to answer questions and provide additional support since this population often cannot turn to a family member for advice.

Statement of the Problem

The recruitment of underrepresented student populations has become critical to meeting the demands of a growing global population. Incorporating diverse individuals into the agricultural industry has also become essential to colleges of agriculture and stakeholders' future viability (Talbert et al., 1997). The USDA (2020) reported that although the educational attainment of ethnic and racial minority groups increased over the last two decades, they remained only half as likely as White students to have a bachelor's degree or higher. Many students from underrepresented communities, notably racial minority students, have historically held negative connotations about the agricultural industry (Alston et al., 2020). This misperception may hinder prospective students' judgment regarding potential academic interests in agriculture (Alston et al., 2019). By developing strategic recruitment initiatives for underrepresented student populations, colleges of agriculture may attract more prospective students and increase enrollment

rates (Drape et al., 2017, 2019). Despite the benefits of attracting more diverse students, however, a problem has persisted regarding a lack of knowledge about successful programming strategies that colleges of agriculture can use to attract underrepresented populations of students. This deficiency in knowledge motivated the current investigation.

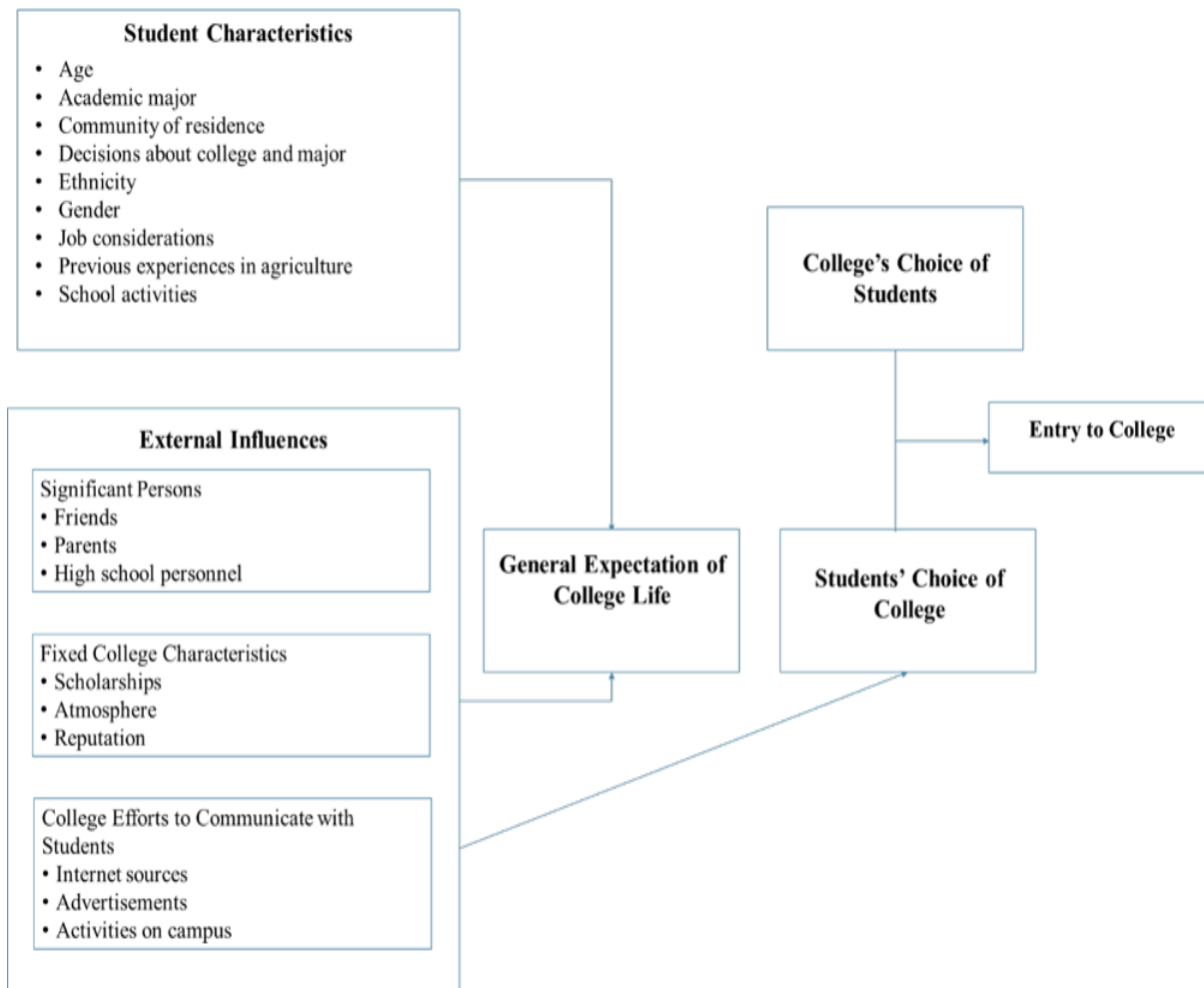
Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by Chapman’s (1981) model of student success (see Figure 1). Chapman (1981) suggested that students were motivated to enroll and pursue a degree by factors such as (a) personal characteristics, (b) external factors, including significant persons, fixed college characteristics, and college communication efforts, (c) general college expectations, and (d) choice of college.

In the current investigation, we employed Chapman’s (1981) model to describe differences in students’ motivation to pursue an agricultural degree at the LSU College of Agriculture based on their inclusion in a diversity initiative for underrepresented student populations. By identifying potential factors influencing enrollment decisions, the LSU College of Agriculture may be able to effectively design recruitment strategies for underrepresented prospective student populations.

Figure 1

Chapman’s (1981) Model of Student Success



Background of Study

Effective recruitment initiatives for underrepresented student populations interested in pursuing degrees in agricultural-related sciences have the potential to diversify colleges of agriculture while increasing enrollment rates (Alston et al., 2019, 2020). In response, the LSU College of Agriculture created the Ag Fellows Program to provide underrepresented student populations with additional knowledge and resources to help them better navigate matriculation.

This study analyzed the Ag Fellows Program outcomes from the Fall 2021 and 2022 cohorts. Underrepresented populations included but were not limited to (a) African Americans, Alaskan Natives, Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, Latin Americans/Hispanics, multiracial, Native American students, (b) low SES students, (c) LGBTQ+ students, and (d) first-generation college students, i.e., neither biological parent has completed a four-year college degree.

Students interested in participating in the Ag Fellows Program applied by submitting a 500-word essay on the topic “What are the biggest issues facing our growing population?” and “How do your career goals fit into solving these global challenges?” After applying, the LSU College of Agriculture Diversity Council assisted in the application review process. Every student selected for the program was invited to an on-campus event. In both years of the program, \$14,000 in scholarships were awarded to Ag Fellows Program participants. As a result of completing the Ag Fellows Program, the goal was that underrepresented students would be better equipped personally and academically for their college careers than those who did not complete the program. Consequently, the findings of this study could provide critical insight into ways that recruitment initiatives for underrepresented students in agriculture could be better supported. Further, this study could allow the LSU College of Agriculture to appropriately adapt their recruitment approaches for these populations.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this case study was to describe the participants’ perceptions of the Ag Fellows Program’s effectiveness in recruiting and preparing them to navigate the College of Agriculture and university successfully. One research question guided this investigation: How did the LSU Ag Fellows Program support students belonging to an underrepresented population?

Methodology

Throughout this investigation, we used an instrumental case study design to examine the experiences of Fall 2021 and Fall 2022 Ag Fellows Program participants, a program facilitated by the LSU College of Agriculture (Stake, 1995). This approach assisted in deepening knowledge regarding the impacts of diversity recruitment initiatives for students identifying as an underrepresented population who may be interested in pursuing a postsecondary degree in agriculture.

Case Selection and Description

In this study, the case was bounded by time and place; for example, the participants were all former or current members of the Fall 2021 and Fall 2022 Ag Fellows Program cohort and identified as belonging to an underrepresented student population in the LSU College of Agriculture. The Ag Fellows Program participants ($n = 6$) were selected based on their responses to a web-based survey, which asked if they would be willing to provide additional insights into their experience through a qualitative study. The participants varied from current high school seniors to first-year college students who expressed interest in pursuing a degree in the LSU College of Agriculture. Students accepted into the Ag Fellows Program were invited to attend the initial program session in the fall semester of their senior year of high school. The

program session consisted of (a) keynote messages from the College of Agriculture administrators, (b) a personal visit with faculty from each of the agricultural academic departments, (c) interaction with current LSU students, (d) meetings with LSU Admissions representatives, and (e) formal tours of the university campus. After the visit, the College of Agriculture provided students with a supplemental scholarship on the premise that they enrolled in the university. The participants' prior experiences in agriculture or agricultural youth development organizations ranged from no experience to highly experienced. Of the participants, five identified as female and one as male. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants' academic and personal characteristics.

Table 1*Participants' Academic and Personal Characteristics*

Pseudonym	Race	Sex	Hometown Population	Socioeconomic Status	Academic Interest	Sexual Orientation
Ciara	African American	Female	Urban	Middle Class	Environmental Management Systems	Heterosexual
Li	Asian	Female	Urban	Upper Class	Animal Sciences	Heterosexual
Manuel	Hispanic	Male	Urban	Middle Class	Agricultural Business	Heterosexual
Sam	White	Female	Urban	Middle Class	Natural Resources Ecology and Management	LGBTQ+
Anne	White	Female	Rural	Lower Class	Animal Sciences	Heterosexual
Amy	White	Female	Rural	Lower Class	Agricultural Education	Heterosexual

Note. We used the U.S. Census Bureau's (2022) definition of urban as having 50,000 people or more. Further, rural was defined as an area not considered urban per the U.S. Census guidelines.

Reflexivity

Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that in qualitative investigations, researchers are the instrument. Therefore, they must be conscious of how their biases, values, and experiences influence their interpretation of data. As a result, we must acknowledge and disclose our relevant background and experiences. The lead researcher identified as a White, cisgender female. She attended college at LSU as an undergraduate student studying agricultural education and animal sciences. During data collection, she was enrolled at LSU in the College of Agriculture as a master's student.

Additionally, the lead researcher was a graduate assistant in the LSU College of Agriculture Office of Recruitment and Retention, where she helped facilitate recruitment events and initiatives, including the Ag Fellows Program. Additional collaborating researchers assisting in data interpretation were faculty at LSU.

We were all proponents of advancing effective diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) recruitment initiatives and advocated for the progression of cultural competence in the agricultural industry.

Data Sources and Analysis

Before their acceptance into the Ag Fellows Program, students were required to submit a formal application detailing contact information, academic status, and respond to an essay prompt. After collecting and reviewing applications, the LSU College of Agriculture Diversity Council selected students who met the academic and demographic qualifications. As a result, we analyzed participants' program applications and essay responses as data for this study. Then, through retrospective interviews, we asked the participants to recall information and assumptions about the LSU College of Agriculture before attending the Ag Fellows Program. In particular, the participants were asked to describe how the Ag Fellows Program contributed to their personal and academic development. We used the following sources of data to emerge the findings of this investigation: (a) interviews, (b) program participants' application and essay responses, (c) the program website, (d) open-ended responses to feedback surveys, and (e) communication created for the advertisement of the Ag Fellows Program.

In total, six Ag Fellows program participants agreed to participate in this study. Stake (1995) noted that small sample sizes were appropriate for qualitative case studies since more emphasis is placed on understanding the depth of individuals' experiences rather than generalizing findings. Interviews were conducted individually through Zoom video conference software based on participants' availability. Example questions we asked participants during the interview, included: "How did the Ag Fellows Program better prepare you for college?" "What was the most beneficial part of the Ag Fellows Program?" and "How can the Ag Fellows Program be adapted to serve underrepresented student populations better?" The interviews were transcribed via Sonix transcription software to ensure clarity.

After completing data collection, Saldaña's (2021) qualitative coding procedures were implemented. Saldaña (2021) explained that a code is "...often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 4). To analyze each data source, we performed the first cycle of coding using attribute, in vivo, and values coding approaches (Saldaña, 2021). Attribute coding features a descriptive approach to analyzing data. Lofland et al. (2006) stated that attribute coding should offer setting-specific information and identify participant characteristics. Meanwhile, in vivo coding refers to examining verbatim dialog in the data record (Saldaña, 2021; Strauss, 1987). The final first-cycle coding approach we employed, values coding, was the culmination of codes representative of the participant's attitudes, beliefs, or perspectives. In total, 284 unique codes emerged after completing the first cycle of coding. We employed axial coding to reduce codes into categories to explore existing relationships of first-cycle codes. This method of second-cycle coding helped emerge patterns in data and assisted our efforts in distilling the dimensions of each category. After employing our second-cycle coding, we met as a research team to negotiate findings using a thematic analysis, which ultimately helped emerge the study's three themes.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

Qualitative research is often reported as being too subjective or laden with biases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Stake (1995) argued that "all researchers have great privilege and obligation: the privilege to pay attention to what they consider worthy of attention and the obligation to make conclusions drawn from those choices meaningful to colleagues and clients" (p. 49). It is essential to accurately report the findings so that they may be representative of study participants' thoughts and beliefs. In this study, we implemented Lincoln's and Guba's (1985) perspectives on quality in qualitative research through the application of (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability. Credibility was achieved through observations of the Ag Fellows Program during program sessions. Retrospective interviews were conducted with both cohorts, Fall 2021 and Fall 2022, to attain transferability and dependability through two applicant groups and program sessions. To ensure confirmability, as researchers, we noted our personal biases prior to

beginning the data collection process. We also established a clear coding schema and analyzed data to verify that results coincided with emerging patterns. Using these standards of qualitative research helped promote rigor and trustworthiness throughout the process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Findings

The findings for this investigation emerged through three themes, representing the participants' perceptions of the Ag Fellows Program's effectiveness and how it influenced their decision to pursue a degree in the LSU College of Agriculture. The themes included (1) motivation to pursue an academic interest in agriculture, (2) overcoming concerns over majoring in agriculture, and (3) belonging through cohort.

Theme #1: Motivation to Pursue an Academic Interest in Agriculture

In the first theme, the participants reported that their experience during the Ag Fellows Program inspired them to pursue a degree in agriculture. For example, each participant outlined how experiences in the Ag Fellows Program exposed them to potential jobs, volunteering opportunities, and involvement in student organizations that aided in their academic major selection process. Ciara, a freshman from an urban area, explained: "I really care about nature and the environment and volunteer at my local nature preserve. I kind of just fell in love with the idea of majoring in agriculture after I became exposed to all of the opportunities through the Ag Fellows Program."

Similarly, Sam, a freshman studying Renewable Natural Resources, explained that she first discovered her academic interests while interacting with other students through the Ag Fellows program who were researching the endangerment of Siberian tigers and other large cat species. Sam explained: "Because of my participation in the Ag Fellows Program, I set the goal of becoming a wildlife specialist to do research and be able to find a way to help up [large cat] numbers and preserve their environments." Exposure to experiential learning opportunities during the Ag Fellows Program, therefore, motivated the students to become engaged in a field of study within the LSU College of Agriculture.

Three out of six participants also reported that the personalized departmental meetings with faculty through the Ag Fellows Program "clarified" their potential degree program or "solidified" their decisions about academic pathways. On this point, Sam reported: "[Departmental visits] pretty much just solidified my decision to major in the LSU College of Agriculture. I obviously had been accepted, but I was continually getting accepted by other colleges. So, I was just like, 'No, LSU College of Agriculture is where I want to be.'"

Therefore, the Ag Fellows Program allowed prospective students to meet with faculty before enrollment to understand their degree requirements and future career opportunities better. Meanwhile, Li, an active member of 4-H, stated that her interest in pursuing a degree in animal sciences increased after participating in the program. She explained: "I just want to give back to the [industry] that gave me so much. The Ag Fellows Program helped me realize that a degree in agriculture was the best way to accomplish this." Therefore, because of their participation in the Ag Fellows Program, the underrepresented students appeared to become more inclined to choose an agricultural-related degree at LSU.

Theme #2: Overcoming Concerns of Majoring in Agriculture

Four out of the six program participants in this investigation reported having little to no agricultural experience prior to their involvement in the Ag Fellows Program. "I have never had any experience with agriculture in my entire life. This program completely exposed something new to me regarding the agricultural industry," said Ashley. However, students expressed optimism in adapting to the challenge of having limited exposure to agriculture. Li stated: "I don't really have much background in [traditional]

agriculture. You think it would put me at a disadvantage, but the Ag Fellows Program helped me realize I could have a place in agriculture.”

Half of the study participants reported that they “did not have” or “did not hear about” agricultural youth programs such as FFA and 4-H during high school. On this point, Sam explained:

I do not have any experience from 4-H, or anybody who has ever been in an ag program... it's just really hard as somebody who came from the city, who loves nature and agriculture. I thought the College of Agriculture was going to expect me to already have all of this knowledge of agriculture. But the Ag Fellows Program opened my eyes that I could still do agriculture as a major and feel welcomed.

The participants also assumed that LSU College of Agriculture staff and faculty would represent traditional stereotypes of the agricultural industry. For example, Manuel, who had little experience with the agricultural industry before enrolling as an agricultural business major, expressed: “I was expecting a lot more people from a farm background. I guess you know, classic, straw in the mouth, straw hat, all that stuff...” He continued: “I expected much more classic country or rural people. I guess people who talk with a twang, and the Ag Fellows Program helped expand my perspective on what ag people were really like.” Ciara reported viewing agriculture as a “predominately White and male” industry, which made her fear she may not be welcomed into the LSU College of Agriculture. However, after her participation in the Ag Fellows Program, she realized “not having an ag background was okay.”

Sam, a member of the LGBTQ+ community, disclosed that she felt anxious prior to engaging in the Ag Fellows Program: “I always get scared that people are going to be like, ‘You're lying. No, you're not [LGBTQ+].’” Five out of six participants reported concerns about judgment from the LSU staff or fellow participants before participating in the Ag Fellows Program. However, after participation, they reported that such issues were no longer a concern – a notion not reflected in Chapman’s (1981) model.

Theme #3: Belonging through Cohort

Through the Ag Fellows Program, the participants met with faculty members in the department of their academic interests. Amy stated that during her visit, she “was toured by [a faculty member], and she is such an amazing lady. She was so excited about the nutrition and food sciences program that she made me want to be there.” Participants also discussed the aspects of the program they felt were most beneficial in their experience on campus. Li, interested in the animal sciences degree program, described that the Ag Fellows Program “made me feel more comfortable, and getting some more details with a person one-on-one. I loved going to speak to some of the students. I thought that was so cool. I definitely would keep that in the program.” Familiarity with current students and the LSU College of Agriculture administration also allowed the Ag Fellows Program participants to grow more comfortable on campus.

After inquiring about participants’ reasoning for applying to the Ag Fellows Program, Anne, a low-SES student, replied: “I was honestly just kind of looking for more ways to help pay for college.” The participants expressed that the supplemental scholarship awarded through the Ag Fellows Program helped alleviate the burden of tuition, reduced feelings of anxiety about the costs of college enrollment, and made them feel like they belonged. Amy stated: “[My mom] mentioned that it was a scholarship, and I should definitely apply because she was gonna be helping me pay for college, and it was definitely going to be a hard battle, especially since LSU is out of state.” Amy also reported that the Ag Fellows Program was beneficial because it “[provided] a scholarship for a low-income student like me; I really was nervous about tuition before coming to LSU. After the scholarship, I felt like I belonged and was part of the group.” Sam reported that the Ag Fellows Program offered financial aid through a “scholarship that isn’t based on 4-H or FFA experience.” Similarly, Manuel communicated that “\$1,000 is \$1,000” and that he was “extremely thrilled” to be receiving financial assistance, and now he felt like he “could be an ag student.”

Each of the study participants revealed feelings of anxiety and nervousness prior to attending the Ag Fellows Program on campus. Sam stated, “I was a little nervous. It’s not really common for me to see programs that are this open about accepting students like me.” Participants also reported that they were met with a “welcoming” and “accepting” attitude from the LSU College of Agriculture faculty, staff, and administration. Ciara expressed: “We are all a part of a minor demographic, but they were really kind and accepting.” Students also communicated feeling more relaxed once they recognized familiar faces in attendance. “I recognized some of the people presenting there, which really made it feel like I was already at home,” said Li. Throughout the duration of the program session, students began to engage in conversation with peers and faculty. The Ag Fellows Program participants reported that they also learned about resources and student organizations offered by the College of Agriculture.

Conclusions

Through an analysis of the data, we determined that the themes that emerged in this investigation could be beneficial to assisting the LSU College of Agriculture with the strategic planning and advancement of future recruitment initiatives for underrepresented student populations. Academic interests and experiences during the Ag Fellows Program appeared to influence participants’ decision to pursue a degree in agriculture. In this investigation, we also discovered that instrumental mentors assisted in guiding students’ interest in degree programs related to agriculture. Such findings align with Chapman’s (1981) model as well as data reported in the broader literature on the recruitment of diverse students to colleges of agriculture (Alston et al., 2019, 2020).

In this study, half of the participants reported that they had little to no agricultural industry experience. The remaining participants reported having some exposure to traditional agriculture, such as owning livestock and planting a garden – a finding supported by the work of Bullock et al. (2021). Therefore, we conclude that the participants faced challenges as non-traditional agricultural students regarding their decision to enroll in an agricultural-related degree program – a finding reinforced by the broader literature (Drape et al., 2017, 2019; Irlbeck et al., 2014). Participants who had little to no traditional agricultural experience had stereotypical misperceptions about individuals working in the industry prior to participating in the Ag Fellows Program. For example, participants reported expecting industry leaders to be White and male. As such, we conclude that Ag Fellows Program helped widen students’ perspectives on the types of individuals who can find employment in agriculture. This notion that does not appear to have been previously explored in the broader literature.

Each of the participants reported that the financial incentive that accompanied the Ag Fellows Program was their primary motivation for applying. From this, we conclude that the scholarship provided by the LSU College of Agriculture’s Ag Fellows Program was an influential factor in recruiting students from underrepresented populations to the program – a concept that aligns with Chapman’s (1981) model of student success. We also conclude that participation in departmental visits with faculty in the student’s major of interest allowed the Ag Fellows to learn more about the degree programs offered by the LSU College of Agriculture. Through these interactions with faculty, the participants were able to better plan their academic journey and receive a deeper understanding of potential career opportunities available in the agricultural industry after graduation. As such, we conclude that program personnel, including the LSU College of Agriculture staff and administration, promoted a sense of belonging amongst the program’s cohort. However, some participants reported being nervous and experiencing increased anxiety prior to attending the Ag Fellows Program. Meanwhile, introducing the participants to the campus environment and resources available to underrepresented student populations contributed to their feelings of support.

Discussions, Implications, Limitations, and Recommendations

By identifying potential trends and strategies that attract underrepresented groups to baccalaureate degrees in agriculture, the findings of this study could be used to introduce more diversity to the agricultural industry (Alston et al., 2020). Chapman's (1981) model for student success framed this investigation conceptually, which helped illuminate the major factors that influenced students' decision to engage in the Ag Fellows Program as well as enroll in the LSU College of Agriculture. Responses from participants largely supported Chapman's (1981) model regarding the importance of significant persons and the college's atmosphere to the recruitment process. Unique to this study, however, was how the Ag Fellows Program helped participants overcome their concerns about majoring in agriculture. Therefore, this finding warrants further consideration and could lead to the refinement of Chapman's (1981) model.

Therefore, we recommend that the LSU College of Agriculture dedicate resources to designing a communication campaign to better reach underrepresented students regarding the benefits of undergraduate programs in agriculture. Through greater exposure, the Ag Fellows Program could expand in participant numbers to offer support to students across the nation identifying as an underrepresented population. To achieve a wider program outreach, we recommend that the LSU College of Agriculture make communication of event details and advertisement of the Ag Fellows Program application more accessible to underrepresented student populations. The dissemination of the program information can be achieved through sponsored social media advertisement posts, a dedicated website page, an email campaign, and letters sent to students in school districts that historically serve underrepresented student populations. Through this investigation, we also discovered that the participants received little to no follow-up communication or mentorship opportunities after the Ag Fellows Program concluded. Additional program sessions with university DEI administration may more profoundly prepare students for personal and academic development prior to their freshman year in the College of Agriculture at LSU. Because familiarity with the LSU College of Agriculture departmental faculty and staff was found to influence underrepresented students' decisions, we also recommend that networking opportunities be created with these individuals so that high school students may ponder a degree in agriculture more deeply. Finally, we recommend that administrators, faculty, and recruiters in the LSU College of Agriculture more clearly articulate scholarship and funding opportunities associated with agricultural degree programs to potential underrepresented student populations.

As the global population expands and the demand for food and fiber increases, U.S. colleges of agriculture must further investigate effective recruitment methods for underrepresented student populations (Alston et al., 2019, 2020). Additional research will be needed for the creation and evaluation of strategic programming, such as the Ag Fellows Program, to influence an influx of educated, diverse employees into the agricultural workforce. Further, additional studies should examine the effect of increased outreach to parents/guardians of underrepresented students interested in agriculture. Researchers may also consider the effect of including the LSU College of Agriculture alumni, who identify as an underrepresented population, in intentional recruitment initiatives. Perhaps the inclusion of underrepresented alumni could help underrepresented students perceive they belong in colleges of agriculture and the broader industry.

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