

The Conflicts of Agriculture: Exploring the Agricultural Ideologies of University Agricultural Education Students

Michael J. Martin¹ & Kellie J. Enns²

Abstract

American agriculturalists are divided on a variety of issues related to production and consumption of food. Broadly speaking, two groups have emerged along two ideological lines: agrarian populism, which articulates conventional agricultural values, and neo-agrarianism, which shares some nonconventional agricultural values. Although both groups may find common ground, their ideological differences have led to conflict. Land-grant institutions are not immune to this type of conflict. This study examined how differing agricultural ideologies affected the experiences of agricultural education undergraduates at a land-grant institution. Two focus groups of agricultural education students at [University] were set apart to explore their agriculture values. Three themes emerged from this study: (a) acknowledgement of different agriculture values; (b) deeply rooted agriculture values; and (c) conflicts arising from differing agriculture values. Arguments from some students centered on agrarian populist ideological ideals, including traditional agriculture, farming, and rural lifestyle values and were often rooted in emotions. They were concerned about protecting a way of life, which they felt was being threatened by others. Some participants who had more neo-agrarian agriculture values did not freely present their arguments; but, seemed more comfortable promoting some of the more traditional agrarian populist ideals.

Keywords: agricultural ideologies, conflicting values, conventional, nonconventional, diversity, neo-agrarianism, agrarian populism

Introduction

American agriculturalists (those working in agriculture) are currently divided between two broadly opposing camps with differing values: conventionalists and nonconventionalists. Conventionalists argue for a system of agricultural production that can provide the world's growing population with safe and abundant food (Borlaug, 2000; Miller & Conko, 2004). Nonconventionalists argue for a system of agricultural production that centers on community, environment, and social justice (Berry, 1977; Freyfogle, 2001; Thompson, 2010). This debate is played out in the media (Chipotle Mexican Grill, 2013; Dodge Ram, 2013), through advocacy organizations (Center for Food Integrity, 2014; Organic Consumers Association, 2014), and within governmental bodies (Chamberlain, 2013). The goal of both conventional and nonconventional agriculturalists is to sway the general public, described as mostly agriculturally illiterate (National Research Council, 1988), and secure policy or economic advantages favoring their viewpoints (Brewster, 2012).

¹ Michael Martin is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics at Colorado State University, Clark B-333, Fort Collins, CO 80523, michael.j.martin@colostate.edu

² Kellie Enns is an Associate Professor in the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics at Colorado State University, Clark B-334, Fort Collins, CO 80523, kellie.enns@colostate.edu

Debates on these viewpoints have challenged agricultural education students the College of Agricultural Sciences. These debates have shaped the work in Colorado, as school-based and nonformal agricultural education is being introduced into more urban and suburban communities whose residents often have different perspectives. The repercussions of these conflicts are significant for agricultural education, not only in Colorado but throughout the United States. In order for agricultural education in Colorado and throughout the United States to be successful, teachers and stakeholders must be able to work with people who have different agricultural values in a constructive manner.

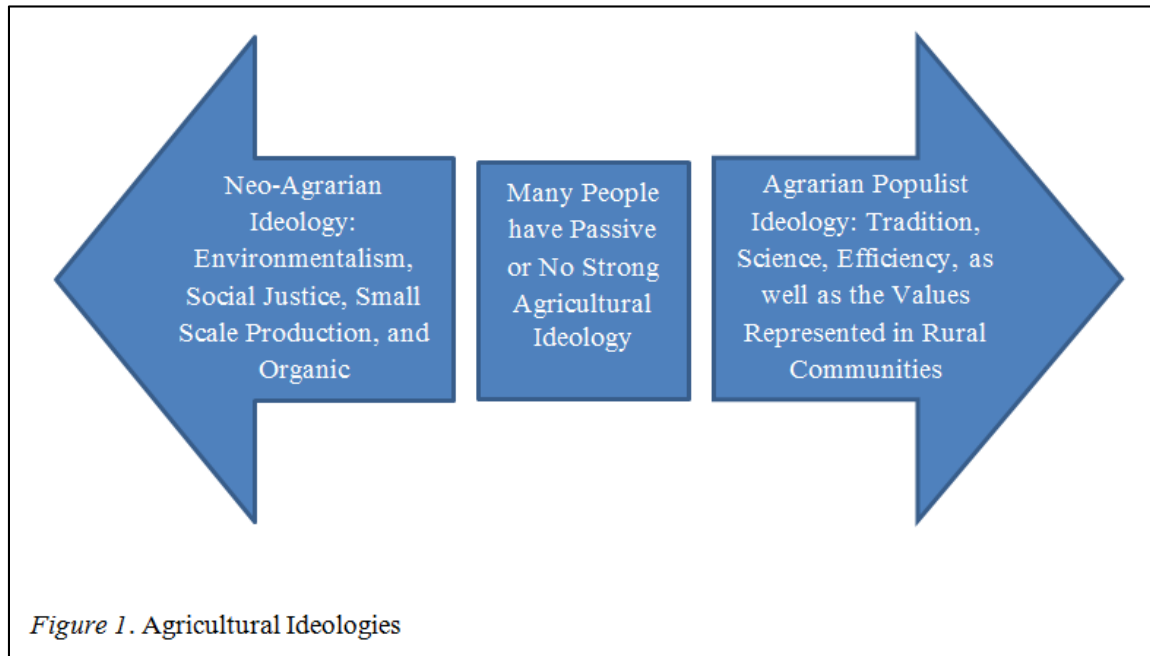
The way that university agricultural education students think about agriculture shapes how they will work in their future classrooms, communities, and organizations, as well as how they will interact with students and community members. However, undergraduate agricultural education student conceptualizations of agriculture have not been explored. Researchers have studied how school-based agriculture teachers view students from a different race or ethnicity (i.e., LaVergne, Larke, Elbert, & Jones, 2011; Vincent, Killingsworth, & Torres, 2012; Warren & Alston, 2007); yet, agricultural values represent a different kind of diversity. The research on how people conceptualize agriculture in our agricultural education research outlets has centered primarily on high school student views of school-based agricultural education (SBAE) curriculum, programs, students, and the FFA (Esters & Bowen, 2005; Hoover & Scanlon, 1991; Jones & Bowen, 1998; Talbert & Larke, 1995). For instance, Phelps, Henry, and Bird (2012) found that some non-FFA members had negative perceptions of FFA members and used negative agrarian language (i.e., hick) to describe FFA members. These studies provide valuable examples on how the clash of agriculture perceptions may be playing out in schools. Teachers and curriculum planners can benefit from these findings. However, the agricultural values of college students have not been thoroughly reported in the literature. Professors and curriculum planners in colleges of agriculture across the country may benefit from examining the challenges and responses to differing ideals in agriculture.

The lack of knowledge about agricultural education students is an issue. Understanding how student perceive challenges to their own ideals and how students will react to those problems will promote more effective teaching and learning about agriculture in their future careers. This study seeks to understand how college agricultural education students conceptualize their agricultural values at one land-grant institution.

Conceptual Framework –Agricultural Ideologies

This study was informed by two polarized agricultural ideologies: agrarian populism and neo-agrarianism. Ideologies are the beliefs and value systems of a group (Guttek, 2004). Groups are broadly defined and can be large (citizens of a whole country) or small (members of an organization). An example of differing ideologies would be political ideologies in the United States (conservatism, liberalism, and libertarianism). Ideologies can be very subtle, often unseen and can vary within and across seemingly similar groups. Ideologies are different from philosophies. Philosophies (such as realism and idealism) tend to be universal perspectives of a world that changes little over time. In contrast, ideologies can vary from region to region and from group to group even when the ideology shares the same name. For example, conservatism differs in Europe and in the United States and conservatism differs in the Southern region of the United States compared to the Mountain West. For example, social conservatism is significant in the South while fiscal conservatism is more prominent in the Mountain West. This general framework, represented in Figure 1, provides two perspectives about agricultural ideologies (agrarian populism and neo-agrarianism) which informed this study. Both ideologies have opposing perspectives but vary in

values along the continuum. People may find themselves gravitating toward one end of the continuum or the other, but they may not have the all values presented on either end.



While many people directly involved in agriculture might prescribe to one particular agricultural ideology, many Americans do not have a strong agricultural ideology. People may have opinions on significant agricultural issues and have the opportunity to exercise that opinion through consumer actions and political initiatives. However, these choices may not explicitly identify and uphold a particular agricultural ideology. For instance, people who purchase organic food may have opinions on agriculture which align to a neo-agrarian ideology; yet, they do not want to consistently work towards upholding the values of neo-agrarianism. For example, people who shop at an organic grocery store may not want to participate in community-based gardening programs. This situation should not be viewed as a condemnation of these people. In fact, someone's values could be split on different issues and a person may not advocate for a specific agricultural ideology, although many of the debates presented within agriculture have been framed from either an agrarian populist or neo-agrarian ideology.

An agrarian populist ideology, generally speaking, encompasses values centered on the concept of conventional farm and ranch production practices and rural and traditional agricultural values (Allen, 2004). This ideology has strong roots in classical agrarian (Crevecoeur, 1998; Jefferson, 1969) and southern agrarian (Twelve Southerners, 1977) ideologies. Agrarian populism celebrates the mythology of rural life which posits that hard work on or near a farm will lead to a life of high morality and ethics. These values may be more myth than historical reality; however, this myth has existed since classical agrarianism and forms a foundation for American thought. Some of the expressed values of the agrarian populism include efficiency, individualism, responsibility, family, and patriotism (Hanson, 1996). The ideology is relatively new in the literature with only a handful of authors focusing on it (Allen, 2004; Hanson, 1996); yet, the framework for agrarian populism has been co-opted by many writers, policy makers, politicians, and advocates because of its power to resonate with people.

The broad concept of conventional agriculture would fall within the perspective of agrarian populism. Those with conventional agriculture values expound on the need for scientific progress in agriculture and argue for continued development to feed the world's growing population (Conway, 2012). They draw upon the great successes of modern agriculture, such as increased production, more nutritious and hardy crop varieties, as well as the economic vitality of the family farm and agricultural industry. Certain advertisement campaigns, like *God Made a Farmer* (Dodge Ram, 2013), have agrarian populist undertones centering on rugged individualism. The images in these commercials appeal to many Americans who view the depicted lifestyle as ideal. Media campaigns like *God Made a Farmer* provide a message for people favoring the agrarian populist ideology to conceptualize or reaffirm their beliefs. Even though the agrarian populist ideology resonates with many Americans, the tenets of agrarian populism are not developed as well as the concepts of the neo-agrarian ideology.

The neo-agrarian ideology values alternative agriculture and typically smaller-scale farm and ranch production practices. Neo-agrarian ideology closely aligns to nonconventional agriculture values and could include a wide variety of contemporary movements, such as food justice (Levoke, 2006) and organic agriculture (Allen & Kovach, 2000). Neo-agrarian arguments often focus on the balance between the environment and people, which includes production agriculture. The roots of neo-agrarianism stretch back to Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) and Rachel Carlson's *Silent Spring* (1962). According to this viewpoint, the rapid development of agriculture over the last 100 years has created ecological and social disasters (Berry, 1977; Thompson, 2010). Industrial agriculture and the entities which perpetuate this system are viewed as destructive agents (Vallianatos, 2006). While these issues have practical undertones, neo-agrarians also believe that Americans are philosophically disconnected from their food (Jackson, 1985). They share this viewpoint with agrarian populists; yet, the neo-agrarian view would differ from the agrarian populist perspective by arguing that anyone can and should become directly involved with production agriculture. These localization initiatives include community-supported agriculture organizations and organic farming movements (Lyson, 2004), which can place neo-agrarian values and practices at odds with agrarian populist values (Miller & Conko, 2004).

Purpose

The purpose of this narrative study is to describe the way selected undergraduate agricultural education students conceptualize their values about agriculture. Utilizing a focus group setting, we sought to understand how students would discuss their agriculture values and their interactions with others in regards to their own agriculture values. The following research question guided the data collection and data analysis process: How did the students discuss their agricultural values and interactions around these values in a focus group setting?

This research aligns to Priority 1 of the National Research Agenda (Enns, Martin, & Spielmaker, 2016) by preparing future agriculture educators to work in communities that have diverse ideas about agriculture.

Methods

This study utilizes narrative methods to explore the way agricultural education students conceptualize their agriculture values and experiences. Narrative research is a valuable tool to allow people to tell their own lived experiences (Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). The voice of the students was kept intact by utilizing block quotes as much as possible. The class-wide focus groups consisted of two different groups of agricultural education

students: teacher-education students, who are seeking certification as school-based teachers, and non-formal education students, who plan to work in the broader field of agricultural literacy, to explore student conceptualizations of agriculture. The teacher-education students were working towards their licensure to teach school-based agricultural education. The non-formal agricultural methods class included students interested in conducting agricultural literacy work. Focus groups were utilized to elicit ideas from the two groups of students (Krueger, 1994), with facilitator questions prompting insightful and rich conversations between students which could not have been replicated in one-on-one interviews.

The population of this study was the students enrolled in two different agricultural education methods classes. There were 24 students who participated in these groups: 12 in the teacher education focus group, and 12 in the nonformal education focus group. We did not parcel out the findings between each group to protect the anonymity of the students. The demographics of both students groups were fairly similar. The students were all Caucasian. Thirteen students were from rural communities and 11 from suburban or urban communities. Thirteen students were from families with agricultural backgrounds (families were involved in agriculture). Females (20) made up the majority in both groups compared to the four males in the groups.

As researchers, our agricultural background and values were also important in this study as we served as the co-facilitators during the focus groups. We were both faculty members in our agricultural education program, had taught school-based agriculture, and had conventional agriculture backgrounds. While our pre-existing ideology about agriculture was agrarian populist, we explored neo-agrarian values in order to serve students and stakeholders in Colorado. The data analysis is on the values expressed by the students, and we tried to be unbiased in our interpretations.

The data for this study emerged from the two focus groups. The focus groups were 60 and 90 minutes long. Students were recruited for this study from the two different agricultural education methods courses offered in our program. Their involvement in the study was voluntary and did not affect their standing in the course. The students were informed of their rights according to the guidelines set forth by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), which included their right to not answer sensitive questions or to leave the focus group at any point. The focus groups were recorded and later transcribed with pseudonyms to protect the identity of the students.

The focus group protocol focused on eliciting student views on agriculture by exploring how they thought about agriculture (Kvale, 1996). The focus groups addressed these questions:

1. What are agriculture values?
2. What is your identify/values in agriculture?
3. How was your agriculture identify formed?
4. What is the role of Ag Education in forming agriculture identities?
5. What does your identify play out in agricultural education?
6. What happens when your agriculture values are infringed on?

Each person in both focus groups was asked to answer the first and second questions, while the last four questions were open for anyone to answer and discuss. The questions centered on participants' experiences with values because the concept of ideology might be harder for the participants to understand in this setting. These questions provided the opportunity for students to talk about their beliefs; however, probing questions were important because the ideas which emerged differed by student. Different probing questions for each focus group were used to garner a clear understanding of their conceptualization of agriculture. Students were encouraged to

respond to their cohort's comments during this interaction, which is a positive attribute of the focus group technique.

A thematic analysis for narrative data (Reissman, 2008) and a data coding process that resembled the constant comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was utilized in this study. First, focus group transcripts were read to identify significant and common ideas (commonly referred to as codes) expressed during the students' discussions of agricultural values. Second, we met to discuss and identify what categories emerged from related codes. Next, transcripts were reread and coded based on the newly established general categories. Fourth, a meeting was held to discuss how categories could translate into the themes of the study. A consensus could not be reached on the persistent themes, and the manuscript was once again reread and recoded. The contention centered on how to most accurately name the emergent themes, in light of the guiding research question. After the final reading, themes were established. When discussing their agriculture values students expressed three different scenarios: (a) acknowledgement of different agricultural values, (b) deeply rooted agricultural values, and (c) conflicts arising from differing agricultural values. A final meeting occurred to discuss and write the significance of the ideas which emerged.

As researchers, we followed qualitative standards during the study. Credibility focuses on the accuracy of the findings. Credibility was maintained by presenting the student voices in long block quotes and by utilizing an emergent data analysis process. Furthermore, we practiced researcher reflections by conducting meetings before and after each focus group as well as numerous meetings during the data analysis process. These reflection meetings helped us work through our personal biases as we prepared for each focus group and progressed through each step in the data analysis process. Dependability of the findings was maintained by finding differing or conflicting themes in the transcripts. This was a purposeful act during the data analysis process in which we would try to find examples within the data to refute, clarify, or strengthen the categories and themes we identified. Finally, confirmability was built into this study by developing an extensive audit trail of data analysis notes for each round of theming. This audit trail consisted of an Excel spreadsheet which highlighted the codes, categories, and themes which emerge through each step of the data analysis and linked the data points back to the larger data set (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorenson, 2009).

Findings

The findings were organized by the three themes which emerged during the study. When discussing their agriculture values students expressed the three different scenarios: acknowledgement of different agricultural values; deeply rooted agricultural values; and conflicts arising from differing agricultural values.

Acknowledgment of Different Agricultural Values

Students from both focus groups initially talked about how people should be open to different agriculture values. This idea came from the students' desire to help build a better and more inclusive future for agriculture.

Everyone, no matter what it is, whether its agriculture or anything else in life, everyone's going to have different values. If everyone had the same values, then we couldn't connect to everyone else in the world. I think it's good that everyone has different values because then you'll be able to connect better with somebody out there than someone else might be able to, so it's going to be easier to get points

across when people can find people to connect to; as opposed to everyone just thinking the same.

Many of the students verbally agreed with this basic idea. Other students took a pragmatic perspective. "...If you want to progress, you'll approach things with an open mind. Take what works for you and reject what doesn't work for you." These comments highlighted a strong sense of unity in agriculture. This could be expected in a university setting. Finally, one student described the need to bring more people together into agriculture because of farmers and ranchers. "There's a generation gap of who [are] farmers and ranchers right now and it's getting bigger, and they're getting older and we need to bring more people in there" As the students continued talking, they began to provide more details which illuminated divisions within agricultural values.

Discussion quickly evolved from talking about their own agricultural values to how those values differed to other people's agricultural values. Participants began to infuse rules and values into their discussions. One student reported:

I really liked what you said about respect, and as long as people are educated, I absolutely think it's OK for them to have their own ideas. I think respect is key above anything else. Who's to say because someone doesn't come from an agricultural background that they can't have a very valu[able], educated perspective on ag[riculture] policies and procedures. As long as they are educated on it and not just reading [an] extreme line.

This student had clear guidelines for having discussions about agricultural values. Students generally preferred people who were educated about agriculture and not extreme in their views.

The insinuation that some people are uneducated about agriculture and that there is a line that can be crossed hinted at the agricultural tensions that students were initially hesitant to talk about. A student discussed this feeling of apprehension when talking to their peers in the following quote. "I am stuck between... respect[ing] those values, obviously, but when you want to advocate for something, how do you just sit back and say, I'm just not going to show them my point of view and why it's important." One student provided vivid details about the negative stereotypes within agriculture by referring to what other people say about agriculturalists.

I think that as an instructor or a teacher of agriculture, you need to be able to educate people about the different identities, and that just because you are an organic producer doesn't mean you need to have long hair or you have to fit certain criteria. Just because you're a cowboy doesn't mean you have to be the Marlboro man. Agriculture's about doing your thing and supporting your thing, and spreading out and learning about other things that you may not necessarily agree with.

The students spoke about how we should avoid such conflicts. The philosophical openness which dominated the early conversations would completely fade as the focus groups continued.

Deeply Rooted Agriculture Values

Many students in this study believed that they should be open to other ideas; however, their conversations soon highlighted entrenched differences. Students first talked about how they experienced these entrenched values from other people. One student described how a professor antagonized vegetarian and vegan students in their class by saying, "The west was not won on

salad.” Many conversations revealed firm opinions at their base and acknowledged a vast divide between their own and the opposing agricultural viewpoint. As an example, one student indicated that acceptance into agriculture required a conventional agriculture upbringing:

‘You didn't grow up on a farm. You don't know what you're talking about.’ I think that's ag[riculture], unlike other industries, say, like nursing, you grow up in it. It's not a career; it's a lifestyle. People who grow up on farms almost have this little bit of pride that goes with it.

Consistently, another student indicated, “It [conventional agriculture] is a little bit inclusive. I completely respect that. That you come from [conventional agriculture] and it [conventional agriculture] is a lifestyle. You did grow up with it [conventional agriculture].” Those with a conventional viewpoint on agriculture indicated that this was a value set that was native to them, and contended that those who developed conventional agricultural values later in life may not have a legitimate understanding of agriculture.

Strong student opinions on production practices emerged and were often qualified with statements such as, “It's a hard thing,” and, “Respect others,” in an attempt to make their own opinions more acceptable:

I think different values are important. I know that I've run into people who think that farms should just go corporate and that small farms [should go big], that's fine. If you buy beef and it comes from a smaller farm, you end up paying more for it, and then if it comes from corporate, the big corporate price is a little cheaper. People have their different opinions, and that's fine. It's really hard.

Another student said, “I think it's also more important to respect people's values. Not one way's the wrong way. People who do use chemicals aren't evil.” These discussions highlight the emergent issues in agriculture and helped to highlight the deep values students hold on agriculture.

Students acknowledged that communicating to others about deeply entrenched agricultural values can be challenging. “Don't just offend them right off the bat. You can be like, ‘If you believe this...but let me show you....’” Statements like this highlight the struggle of students in trying to convince others to shift to their own viewpoints on agriculture or finding a middle ground with them. Should they advocate for their own opinions and lifestyles or values, or be open to those of others? The following quote explains this conundrum:

I believe it's good that everyone has different values. I am stuck between, of course respect[ing] those values, obviously, but when you want to advocate for something, how do you just sit back and say, ‘I'm just not going to show them my point of view and why it's important?’ I don't even know how to answer that...

While students expressed willingness for open-mindedness and a desire to avoid conflict over their agricultural values, they also reported that they have had negative interactions with people about agricultural values.

Conflicts Arising from Different Agricultural Values

The students deeply rooted agriculture values, conventional or nonconventional, lead to negative confrontations. Students both personally experienced the conflict and acted as witnesses outside these conflicts. Students became more comfortable and reflective as the focus groups

progressed, and were able to dissociate and reflect upon such agricultural value clashes. One student commented about a nonconventional student taking an agricultural course as an elective:

...But there's this kid in there [a college agriculture class]. He's just a regular [nonagriculture major] student. He's just taking the class just for credit. The class is set up for ag[riculture] so it uses ag[riculture] terms. He looked at the kid next to him and asked her...he [non-agriculture student] didn't know what a steer was. This girl went off on him. I'm talking cuss words were used.... I think that really turns people off, because [I'm] coming from a place where I understand that not everyone is going to know this. I was just dumbfounded by the way she treated him.

Discussions about the conventional agricultural viewpoint often reflected an idea that conventional agriculture is something into which you are born.

The clashes could become personal and hurtful for those who felt they were excluded from the conventional lifestyle. Trying to break into a conventional agriculture system proved to be challenging. A student from a suburban city who was majoring in agriculture reported the following:

People ask me, "Then what are you doing in this major?" They [fellow agriculture students with conventional perspectives] totally put me down. I call my mom all the time, and I'm like, 'Mom, I can't do this anymore. They're so mean.' She's like, 'I don't understand why agriculture's different than anything else, because when someone goes into nursing school, they haven't nursed their whole life. They haven't grown up in a hospital.'...But I think maybe that's where it [agriculture] differs. Because it's [agriculture] a life.

The conventional agriculture lifestyle, often portrayed with rural idealist notions, was a lifestyle of which some students from the city and suburbia wanted to be a part. A student said, "You can't even borrow sugar from somebody in my cul-de-sac." Student discussions revealed that the qualifications for being part of this lifestyle were stringent.

As the focus groups neared their end, some students who expressed a conventionalist ideal or status were able to acknowledge the closed nature of their group—even to the point of recognizing the possibility of hypocrisy in their messaging. A student related the following:

I almost think it's hypocritical. I'm from a farm, and I'm proud of it, but it's almost hypocritical. You're trying to inform people where your food's from. You're trying to get them to be on your side, but then you're going to turn them away and make them feel like they can't do it. It's hypocritical.

A student who had nonconventional agricultural values agreed: "A lot of people highlighted the point that rural communities are a lot friendlier and more open. That seems like a contradicting statement to me." These conversations highlight how conventional agriculture values could be tied to rural ideals. Furthermore, membership and legitimacy in a conventional agriculture group seemed tied to being from a rural community.

The focus group examples of a clash in agricultural values often centered on how conventional agricultural values on campus conflicted with those of other students who did not share these values. However, there were some examples which indicated the opposite situation,

only off campus. A conventional agriculture student related a story from her encounter with two customers at her place of work who had nonconventional agriculture values:

For example, last night, I was working. I'm a waitress, and these two guys came and asked what I did. I told them I went to school for ag[riculture]. That's my background. I lived on an apple farm. They were like, 'I hope it's organic.' I was like, 'No. Organic is great, but we don't have the market for it.' I try to explain it. I'm taking a class [agricultural education] right now where I'm trying to have these conversations. He was just throwing [saying] such biased things. They started talking about Monsanto, and I was like [in her thoughts], 'Oh my gosh, you might as well just walk out now because you're never going to want me to wait on you again.' I'm like [said], 'I get where you're coming from.' He's like, 'They're [Monsanto] evil, blah blah blah.' I'm like, 'I understand what you mean by that.' ...I tried to explain to them, as much as I could, both sides.

This and other examples of students with conventional agriculture values who feel alienated in certain situations highlighted how the clashes that centered on agriculture values were not just directed towards students with nonconventional agriculture values. The difference seemed to be that nonconventional agriculture students experienced conflicts while in the College of Agricultural Science, while conventional agriculture students experienced issues outside of the college.

Summary and Significance of Findings

The university setting can certainly provide an avenue for discourse about differing agriculture values. Despite the stories of agricultural values conflict and confrontation, some students appreciated how their time in college challenged their opinions about agriculture. A student related the need for education and understanding values regarding agriculture:

We don't know specifically where certain things come from, but someone does. That's something that's important to them. I think the world functions by having all these different interests. You just have to honor them. I think that as long as people are educated, they can have whatever values they want. It's harder to connect with someone when they don't have a solid basis for that value.

As values were being expressed in the focus groups, a few students acknowledged that greater inclusivity in agriculture as a whole is desirable. One student said:

I think that the program here is getting there, and people are becoming more inclusive, but it is important to recognize that not everyone started as a part of that. I still do feel at odds with people a lot of times. It's getting better, but it's still there.

This final comment acutely demonstrates the struggle of agricultural values at the college level. The student discussed how values and curriculum can collide and how colleges should handle the differences:

I'm just trying to think of, even in this room, I would be hard-pressed to come up with curriculum about a certain topic [in a way] that I would not offend at least one individual in this room. I guess my take on it, and again, this is just my opinion, but if you're in college, you're old enough to decipher and make your own

evaluation of what you value. ‘Yes, this is what my professor values, but this is not what I have to value.’

Many agreed with this student’s argument. Yet the findings from this study highlight the enormity of this task.

Discussion

The significant findings of this study centered around two broad concepts: 1) expanding the knowledge base of agrarian ideology and 2) the process of working with conflicts around agricultural values between groups by determining how the conflict occurred and why. These findings are useful as education specialists in agriculture continue to work with diverse individuals, contexts, and value systems (Cano & Moore, 2010; LaVergne, Larke, Elbert, & Jones, 2011; Martin & Kitchel, 2015; Vincent, Killingsworth, & Torres, 2012). The findings indicated that students within these focus groups generally reaffirmed the differing agricultural ideology outlined in the conceptual framework. While we could not accurately identify the agricultural ideologies of each participant, the ideals of agrarian populism (Allen, 2004; Hanson, 1996) and neo-agrarianism (Berry, 1977; Thompson, 2010) were discussed. Through student responses we were able to further articulate ideals found in the conceptual framework; specifically, we confirmed the connection between traditions and rurality to that of the agrarian populist.

Focus group participants behaved politely towards those with diverging agricultural values but were firmly rooted in their own system. Some students had difficulty separating their values regarding agriculture to other related ideals. For example, some students connected their agricultural values to a lifestyle they had growing up in rural areas, relating their values to an agrarian populist ideology. However, the strength of the responses varied, and rather than leaning toward one pole or the other of an agricultural ideological spectrum, the values were presented as a continuum along the spectrum. These variations highlight the complexity of a person’s individual values.

The progression of the focus group discussions revealed an interesting implication about agricultural ideologies. Agrarian populist arguments surrounding agriculture, farming, and rural lifestyles are often rooted in emotions. For instance, participants talked about how they enjoyed the friendliness of their rural communities, positioning their agricultural values in their emotion. These arguments were not supported by factual evidence, which is understandable considering the nature of emotions. They were concerned about protecting a way of life, which they perceived as threatened from others outside who didn’t hold their same values—so much so that it often initiated a fight or flight syndrome in situations. Coincidentally, the agrarian populist argument stayed away from arguments of food production for efficiency and feeding the world. These emotionally centered agrarian populist arguments were challenged by those participants who may not have identified with this ideology. Furthermore, the students who had more non-agrarian values did not argue that their lifestyle and values were more ideal. Instead, they presented their agricultural values by countering some of the emotional conventional agriculture arguments.

The dominance of agrarian populist ideas in these focus groups provides another implication. The predominance of agrarian populist arguments in the focus groups originated from the nature of our student base. Even though half of the participants did not come from agriculture backgrounds, the agrarian populist viewpoints were primarily expressed by most students. These students seemed to feel more comfortable talking about their values. For example, almost every agricultural value presented by the participants (that was not a centrist value statement) had elements of agrarian populism. There were participants who had neo-agrarian values and they later

presented a few counterarguments to the agrarian populist values. However, they did not present neo-agrarian values arguments as readily and seemed more comfortable occasionally countering agrarian populist arguments. The neo-agrarian viewpoints were a minority one. If the setting were different—that is, if we established the same focus groups but used a different program or college setting—then the dynamics of the conversation and the arguments presented may have been different. In short, the context and community that the participants believed they were in during the focus groups may have mattered as much as the actual beliefs of the participants. Further work needs to tease out the differences in these values to allow more effective discussions within educational systems.

The focus group revealed a chronological process of conflicts related to the diverging values: polite acceptance—to emotional attachment to a value system—to outright conflicts related to the opposing value system. Student participants were able to personally describe situations or scenarios they had witnessed in each of these categories. While student tried to not personalize any scenario and remained polite, the process itself was revealing and helped to illuminate experiences they were having.

Participants became less reserved about their agricultural values as the focus groups progressed. Students were not always willing to speak out in favor or against alternative viewpoints. As the focus groups continued, the students were encouraged by their cohorts to express their opinions and values. We didn't protect or advocate for any viewpoint; hence, there was no safe space. Students were allowed to challenge each other's viewpoints in a respectful manner. We created an open space where conflict could arise, minority viewpoints could be expressed, and diversity of thought was valued. This allowed and created situations where students were able to analyze their own value systems and think deeply about how their values might impact themselves and others during the hour long process. This was evident during discussions about the relationship between rural and agricultural values.

There are challenges to working with students who are ideologically diverse. We recommend training and classes for agricultural educators that can help them appreciate differing agricultural values. Students from diverse backgrounds need to be valued to increase the diversity of our student population and eventually the agricultural education workforce. This type of training could resemble some of the work done in multicultural education (i.e., Banks & Banks, 2010). It is beyond the scope of this manuscript to talk about the procedures required to incorporate different agricultural values beyond what was done in this study; thus, we recommend further research and professional development work in these areas.

The concept of an open space was important in these focus groups and could serve as a model for fostering discussion among students about their agricultural ideologies. Students need a space where they are free to express beliefs as well as hear the beliefs of someone who might disagree with them. Furthermore, the beliefs of all students need to be respected. Ideologies should be discussed and respectfully debated. The rules of the focus group could also apply to the classroom in general. There is not a correct agricultural ideology. No one should be expected to change their ideology after a discussion, and differing ideologies need to be valued. The emotions that students have towards a viewpoint need to be recognized; but they also need to be kept in balance. For instance, our focus groups discussed the differences between the facts of rural life and the ideals of rural life. The ideals were often steeped with emotions and discussing this point allowed our students an opportunity to critically reflect. Educators must be honest about their own personal values and discuss with their students how this position would inform their views of agriculture. In this way, the educator sets the standard for the class. Educators need to create open spaces that allow students to have pride in their system of values, without believing their value

system is the best or has the only answers to issues facing agriculture. The problems surrounding agriculture, such as changing demographics and evolving agricultural production systems, require an agricultural education work force that is diverse and able to work with various audiences and ideas.

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