

Factors that Influence African-American Students Not to Enroll in Secondary Agriculture Courses and Not to Pursue Agricultural Related Careers as a Profession

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Abstract

If the agriculture profession is to attract African-Americans to pursue careers in agriculture, the barriers that limit our recruitment efforts must be defined. The purpose of this study was to determine factors that influence African-American students not to enroll in secondary agriculture courses and not to pursue agriculturally related careers as a profession. Data for this study were collected via a focus group interview technique. Nine focus groups consisting of 90 total students participated in the study. The findings indicated that the major reasons African-Americans chose not to pursue agriculturally related careers were that they perceived the work as hard, long hours, low pay, and “outdoors.” The most frequently mentioned factors by the respondents were that the salaries were very low, and they perceived the available careers as just farming. The results of this study suggest that there is great potential for the recruitment of African-Americans to pursue careers in agriculture. The finding also indicated that to accomplish this, agricultural career education should start in a pre-high school setting to educate students on the different types of careers related to agriculture.

Introduction

African-American student recruitment remains a high priority for Land Grant Universities and Colleges of Agriculture, Forestry and Life Sciences. Clemson University personnel have spent countless hours in the recruitment of minority students, especially African-American students. However, there has been limited success in attracting a large number of culturally diverse students to Clemson University’s College of Agriculture, Forestry and Life Sciences. According to Talbert and Larke (1995), African-American students possess more

negative perceptions regarding agriculture and agricultural education, perceive more barriers to enrolling, and are unable to realize opportunities for careers. Sutphin and Stewart (1995) indicated that sociocultural factors, including gender and ethnicity, have affected student's attitudes, beliefs, and enrollment in agriculture courses.

Unfortunately, the debate on how to improve recruitment of minorities, especially African-Americans, is not new. As early as 1971, the Schmitt and Bender study on experiences and preparation for teaching of minority populations indicated little was being done to address this issue. The National Research Council (1988) stated enrollment in secondary agriculture had been predominately white males. However, other studies indicate an increase from 1980 to the present in female enrollment in agricultural courses and career profession. The Strategic Plan for Agricultural Education, by the National Council for Agricultural Education (1989) set a goal for Agricultural Education "to serve all people and groups equally and without discrimination" (p 4).

Other studies indicated that low enrollment of minorities in agricultural sciences begins during high school (Rawls & Thomas, 1994; Bowen, 1994). For this reason, the focus of this study centered upon African-American high school students. Scanlon, Yoder and Hoover (1989) indicated that the overriding barriers to African-American enrollment in secondary agricultural education programs are negative images of agriculture. These images remain today of hard work and low pay. According to Bowen, Bower and Heinsohn (1997) many African-American students associate agricultural science careers with farming or ranching, which leads to negative perceptions. Another study conducted by Bowen and Jackson (1992) indicated that African-American students felt unwelcome in vocational education, thus placing an additional barrier for minority students choosing agricultural education.

Increasing diversity in the workplace to reflect the state population has become a phenomenon that has swept this nation within the past few years. Diversity in agricultural education means that all students from all cultures and backgrounds are enrolled in agriculture classes, programs, and organizations (Moore, 1998). However, African-Americans have been and continue to be underrepresented in most areas of the agricultural sciences. Many link this under representation to perceptions about low salaries, unpleasant working conditions, and slavery conditions that most African Americans faced over 130 years ago (Jones, 1998).

According to South Carolina Education Profiles 2000, South Carolina Department of Education public schools ethnic makeup is black 41.9%, white 55.3%, other 2.8%. However, according to Mr. Tommy Gladden, State Leader of Agricultural Education, enrollment of African-Americans in South Carolina secondary agriculture programs is less than 10%. This fact identifies a tremendous need to attract more African-Americans into agricultural careers, especially as secondary teachers of agriculture. This should aid with recruitment and heighten enrollment figures to reflect the ethnicity of our student population. However, to achieve this goal we must understand why African-American students choose not to pursue careers in agriculture or agricultural education. The research team opted to use the focus group interview technique to gain insight into the perceived barriers of African-Americans concerning agricultural careers. This research project targeted high schools whose total enrollment was predominately African-American students.

Theoretical Framework

Relationships among knowledge, attitude, and behavior suggest that as knowledge increases in a particular area, that person will gradually begin to associate positive connotations to that area (Swanson, 1972). Knowledge and experiences are precursors to attitudinal changes that must occur before behavior can change according to this theory (see Figure 1).

Education → Knowledge → Attitudes → Behavior

Figure 1. Assumed relationships among education, knowledge, attitude, and behavior (Swanson, 1972).

This study used focus groups to determine the level of understanding and the degree of student awareness required to increase African-American enrollment in secondary agriculture education programs, and to determine why African-Americans are not pursuing careers in agriculture. An additional benefit of the focus group interview process would allow the researchers to understand the perceived negative perception that African-American students have of agriculture.

According to Swanson (1972) temporary perceptions often become permanent attitudes, which govern behavior. Several studies suggest that minority students do not obtain current knowledge and relevant experiences on which to base perceptions of agricultural courses and careers. Bowen (1994) recommended that programs be initiated at the elementary and secondary levels to increase the awareness that minorities have of agricultural careers. Other studies suggest that a better system be developed to provide minorities with relevant knowledge and experiences on career opportunities in agriculture. Beliefs and attitudes held about an issue or event are also good predictors of intentions to participate in an educational program, (Sutphin, Newsom-Stewart 1995). Fishbein (1967) concluded that attitudes aid individuals to adjust to their surroundings and provide predictability in behavior and understanding of other behavior.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine factors that influence African-American students not to enroll in secondary agriculture courses and not to pursue agriculturally related careers as a profession.

The researchers used the following four objectives to guide the study:

1. Describe the perceptions of 10th, 11th and 12th grade African-Americans students toward the agriculture and food industry.
2. Describe 10th, 11th, and 12th grade African-Americans students' level of understanding of several basic concepts related to the agriculture and food industry.
3. Describe the perceived barriers 10th, 11th, and 12th grade African-American students feel prohibit them from pursuing a career in the agricultural and food industry.

4. Collect information on the changes that 10th, 11th, and 12th grade African-Americans students feel are needed in the agricultural and food industry to encourage more African-American participation.

Methods and Procedures

The researchers selected focus group interviews as the research instrument for the study. Three predominately black high schools in South Carolina were nominated by the Agricultural Education State Staff to participate in the study. Ten African-American students from each grade, 10th, 11th, and 12th were randomly selected by the school's administrative staff, for a total of 90 students selected to participate. Students and their parents were required to complete permission forms in accordance with Clemson University's Human Subject Regulations.

Twenty questions were designed by the researchers to obtain responses from the groups regarding factors that influence African-American students not to pursue agriculturally related careers as a profession. Two faculty and three state staff members of the Department of Biology Instruction and Agricultural Education established the content validity of the questions. A pilot test, to check face validity, was performed by asking graduate students the exact same questions that were to be asked of the focus group interviewees.

Nine focus group interviews were conducted according to guidelines established by Krueger (1988). A list of questions was developed for the focus group interviews and reviewed by a panel of experts. Swanson's (1972) model was considered in developing the questions used to obtain information from the students. Four graduate students from the Department of Biology Instruction and Agricultural Education at Clemson University were utilized as facilitators for the focus groups. The researchers determined that the high school students would be more candid and open with younger facilitators. The graduate students received training on how to properly conduct a focus group interview and were supplied with a standard scripted introduction, which was used at each interview. Focus groups were conducted at each of the three schools. Each grade level group was interviewed separately at each school. As suggested by Krueger (1988), one facilitator led the focus group discussions for each grade level while all facilitators used identical questions. The focus groups were conducted as round table discussions and were recorded utilizing audio tape recorders with pressure zone microphones and written notes were recorded by an assistant moderator. Information collected on the audiotapes from the focus groups was transcribed for analysis.

Findings of the Study

The participants' responses were grouped into four main categories. These categories were the same as the original objectives. The objectives for this study were used as guidelines in the question development for the focus group and logically served as the categories.

1. Describe the perceptions of 10th, 11th and 12th grade African-American students toward the agriculture and food industry.

The participating students realized that agriculture is the foundation for our worldly existence and recognize its importance in their lives; however, they associate agriculture with farming only. The students clearly stated that their communities and their personal lives could not survive without agriculture. However, these students also perceived individuals involved with agriculture as being among the “lower class” and that it was only for people who did not have a formal education or other career training. Students stated that their parents instructed them while growing up “to be better than your ancestors”. The students also felt that agriculture is “dirty” and did not recognize that there are “clean” areas in the field of agriculture. When asked questions about FFA, most of the students were aware of the organization and its purpose. Some students were aware of the leadership opportunities and community involvement portions of the FFA. However, several students thought that FFA involved only students that wanted to become farmers.

Respondent Quotes:

“Everyone has to eat.”

“Agriculture provides food and shelter.”

“My grandfather worked himself to death on a farm.”

“One has to work too hard, too long, and you get dirty.”

“Farming is too risky. You are dependent on the weather and the markets.”

“FFA is just the kids who farm.”

“It is hot work.”

“I did not know what all you can do in the FFA. I thought it was just for farmers. I did not know that you had all this leadership stuff and competitions, it sounds like fun.”

2. Describe 10th, 11th, and 12th grade African-American students’ level of understanding of several basic concepts related to the agriculture and food industry.

The students were aware that their clothing, food, and shelter were products of agriculture; however, they were not aware of the various processes that are involved before the final product becomes complete. For example, the students were aware that clothing may come from cotton; however they did not understand the process of making cloth and clothing. They understood that bread comes from wheat and grains, but did not understand the bread-making process. The students were aware that farmers use pesticides and other chemicals on crops, but some felt that this was unnecessary. Attitudes towards the slaughtering of animals for food consumption varied from group to group.

Respondent Quotes:

“What do you mean that you have to process the product? All you have to do is grow it.”

“It cost too much to get into farming. There are too many risk involved with farming. You are always afraid of the weather, the markets. No, I want no part of that. I want a job that is secure.”

“There are no high paying jobs related to farming.”

“My parents want more for me than just to be a farmer.”

3. Describe the perceived barriers 10th, 11th, and 12th grade African-American students feel prohibit them from pursuing a career in the agriculture and food industry.

The students expressed that their lack of education about agriculture and agriculturally related careers kept them from choosing these types of careers. They determined that if they had known about careers in agriculture other than farming, they might have been more inclined to choose these types of careers. Another barrier was the fact that their parents constantly encouraged them to be better than their ancestors. A few students thought of their ancestors as slaves involved in agriculture, and therefore, wanted to be better, and did not want to be involved in agriculture. The students thought that all agricultural occupations were labor-intensive and required individuals to work in the “hot sun” during the summer months and the “cold wind” during the winter months. The students also perceived all agricultural occupations to require the individual to get “dirty.” The students’ understanding of agriculturally related career salaries was that they were very low, and that only those who inherited farms or farming operations pursued agriculture as a career.

Respondent Quotes:

“I want to be in a corner office with air conditioning, not in a field on a tractor in the hot sun. I want a job with a title.”

“You don’t have to have an education to farm. My grandfather was a farmer. He always told me to go to school and get an education so I would not have to work like he did.”

“No, I would not be an agriculture teacher. Pay is too low; have to put up with students like me.”

“We need more black teachers, I agree, but I do not want to teach. I think that teaching agriculture would be fun. But they just don’t pay enough and you have to do too much paper work.”

4. Collect information on the changes that 10th, 11th, 12th grade African-American students feel are needed in the agriculture and food industry to encourage more African-American participation.

The students indicated that there needs to be more educational and awareness efforts concerning the positive aspects of agriculture and agriculturally related careers. The students suggested that education about agriculture should begin at younger ages, not just the high school level. They further indicated that by high school, most students have a general idea of the type of career they want to pursue. The students stated they are pressured about making career decisions starting in junior high; however, they are not educated on what possibilities are available. Students reported they have always heard, “Be a doctor” or “Be a lawyer,” but they never heard “Be an animal researcher,” or “Be an Agriculture Teacher” or other careers related to agriculture. The majority of the students noted that they felt pressured to pursue high profile careers with high salaries.

Respondent Quotes:

“You need to create a fast moving TV commercial about the jobs available in Ag.”

“You need to do more of what you are doing today, to educate students like us about what is available in Ag.”

“I did not know about all the career opportunities in Ag. I wish I did.”

“You need to start educating people at a younger age. Here we are in rural South Carolina and I did not know what Ag is about.”

“I want a job that pays six figures and that gives me power. You must have “status” to survive in today’s world.”

Conclusions

The findings of this study tend to support other studies concerning minority perceptions of agricultural education and agricultural career opportunities, (Bowen, Bowen, Heinsohn 1997; Talbert and Larke 1995; Sutphin and Stewart 1995; Jones, 1998). The majority of the participants indicated a very negative perception of agriculture. They perceived agriculture as a profession with no advancement. One would have to work hard, long hours in the hot sun. They also related agriculture to only farming. Slavery was only mentioned by several of the participants as a reason that they had a negative perception of agriculture. The FFA was perceived as a “farm boy” organization. They admitted they knew very little about the organization. However, their perception was that the students involved with the organization worked with cows, pigs, and plows. When one of the students talked about his involvement in the FFA and his participation in CDE’s and other activities, the other members of the group could not believe that he had been that active in the organization. Three conclusions were reached based on the findings and methodology used in this study:

1. The majority of African–American students do have a negative perception of Agriculture.
2. The majority of African–American students have very limited knowledge of the opportunities available to them in agriculture.
3. The majority of African–American students believe that agriculture begins and ends on the farm.

This study clearly implied that the perception of African-American students on agriculture was based on their lack of knowledge. These students based their perceptions on what they have seen, such as farmers in the fields working long, hard hours, and the advice they have received from parents and other adults in their communities. This has given them a negative view of Agriculture. Once the students were informed that agriculture is not just “cows and plows”, they were willing to explore career choices in agriculture. The students indicated that the agricultural professions have done a poor job of educating the public about career opportunities in agriculture.

Recommendations

The researchers have three recommendations based on the findings of this study:

1. That an educational program be developed, using Swanson’s Theory (1972), to educate African-American students at pre high school age about agriculture opportunities.
2. The National FFA should develop an educational program for African–American students to increase awareness of the opportunities made available through the FFA.

3. That this study should be replicated on a regional and national basis.

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Factors that Influence African-American Students Not to Enroll in Secondary Agricultural Courses and Not Pursue Agricultural Related Careers as a Profession

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One of the interesting findings of this research is that, more than ten years after a similar study, African-American students in this study still perceived barriers to enrollment in secondary agriculture education programs and employment in agriculturally-related careers. Then as in the current study, the perceived barriers focused on negative perceptions of agriculture as being related exclusively to “cows, ploughs and sows” and perceptions of the image of agricultural careers as “hard work and low pay.”

The authors are to be commended for fielding a study that has great import for the discipline and for agricultural professionals in general. The literature review clearly articulates the importance of enhancing diversity and encouraging African American youth to pursue secondary agricultural education that may lead to a future career in the agricultural professions. The theoretical framework, although brief, focuses on an appropriate behavioral model. The researchers used a focus group technique, conducting a series of nine focus groups with 90 students located in three predominantly black high schools in Southern Carolina.

Following are some questions that arose from this study:

- ❖ Although the theoretical framework is appropriate, discussion of it is very brief. Could this be expanded, and other relevant frameworks, such as Triandis, commented upon? This would add more veracity to the study.
- ❖ Since this study was done using a qualitative study in three predominantly black schools located in one area, do the conclusions imply some generalization? Perhaps some more substantiation could be added by citing more of the previous study’s findings and indicating how these compare to the current study.
- ❖ Does the key implication of the study, that African American students lack knowledge of agriculture, follow from the findings? Based on the results, there seem to be other potential factors worthy of consideration, such as perceptions of desirable careers, familial and peer influence and cultural factors that perhaps taken together might further dimensionalize these students’ perceptions and behavioral rationale with respect to enrolling in secondary agricultural education and pursuing agricultural careers.

Overall, this is an important study and line of research that should continue to be pursued.