

Recruiting Students for Agricultural Careers Through CSI: Agriculture

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Suspense...Mystery...Adventure. These are all features of the popular primetime TV show Crime Scene Investigation (CSI). Since its premier in 2000, CSI and its spin-offs have attracted millions of viewers weekly; included in this audience are high school students.

Many of the tools and procedures used by investigators on CSI are also used by those employed in many agricultural careers to collect “evidence” and solve agriculturally-related problems. Yet, high school students do not realize that the tools and procedures exhibited on the shows are also used in agriculture on a daily basis by agricultural producers, educators, and scientists.

The Idea

Faculty members responded to an RFP from GEAR UP Mississippi to propose CSI: Agriculture as a summer enrichment camp. Primarily funded through a grant from the United States Department of Education, GEAR UP Mississippi is a collaborative effort of the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning, Mississippi State Board for Community and Junior Colleges and the Mississippi Department of Education. Enacted in 1998, the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program (GEAR UP) funds partnerships of colleges and universities and schools in economically limited communities. The partnerships provide tutoring, mentoring, information on college preparation and financial aid, an emphasis on core academic preparation, and access to scholarship opportunities.

The primary goal of CSI: Agriculture was to expose high school students to investigative procedures and tools used by agriculturalist to solve problems in agriculture. Students in GEAR UP MS designated schools were involved in hands-on personal experiences to explore career opportunities in the agriculture and life sciences. A secondary goal was to make these students aware of courses they needed to complete in high school to prepare them to enter the college of their choice and major in an agriculturally related field.

The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs) has been committed to increasing enrollment in the college, specifically minority student enrollment. Most GEAR UP schools are from areas of the state with large minority populations that lack in adequate financial resources for career awareness. When asked about career choices most students’ answers reflect what they know or have observed locally (careers of parents/ relatives) or what they have seen on television, particularly in reality TV shows like CSI. Careers in the agricultural and life sciences and natural resources are not widely visible or easily accessible in these locations. Even the parents/guardians of these students have limited opportunities to learn about careers in agriculture.

Many students in these schools have the potential to succeed at a major university like Mississippi State. Mississippi still has an agriculture-based economy, and if we are to keep some of the best and brightest students working and contributing in the state and region, we need to prepare them for the careers available in the broad field of agriculture. By attending the camp, participants could develop personal relationships with MSU faculty and become acquainted with campus life and begin to explore and identify potential career opportunities, thus hopefully encouraging them to attend MSU and major in agriculture.

How CSI: Agriculture Worked

CSI: Agriculture was held June 19-23, 2006 at Mississippi State University. Faculty members from academic units in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and the College of Veterinary Medicine conducted hands-on learning activities for students that were centered on career opportunities in agriculture. Such activities included blood analysis, irrigation technologies, fuel analysis, mineral and soil analysis, food composition, DNA analysis, textile identification, and disease transmission. To conclude this camp, students completed a detective activity, applying principles and concepts learned during the camp to solve a mystery, much like those individuals do on CSI. The residential camp also included leadership and personal development activities and opportunities to explore the multitude of careers in agriculture and the life sciences. Students also experience true campus life by staying in the dorm, eating in campus dining facilities, and using the recreational facilities on campus.

Results to Date

Forty-two students applied to attend the CSI: Agriculture camp with 23 actually attending the camp. Overall, students liked the camp with activities in food composition, disease transmission, and fuel analysis being rated the highest. While students liked the crime scene activity, there was some confusion as to what students should actually look for when collecting evidence. Better communication between the planners, camp counselors, and students would alleviate this problem.

Costs/Resources Needed

A budget of \$24,601 was submitted to GEAR UP Mississippi to conduct this camp with realized expenditures of \$22,686. The budget included salaries and fringe benefits for the camp director and five student counselors, room and board for counselors and campers, project materials, project supplies, t-shirts, recreational passes, and transportation expenses.

Future Plans

Plans are being made to conduct the camp again next year. The camp was the most requested camp by students, but approximately half of the students were unable to attend the camp because they lack a way to get to the campus. After talking with GEAR UP administrators, strategies for being developed to find ways to get students who want to attend the camp to campus. Apparently lack of transportation is the number one reason why campers are unable to attend. GEAR UP administrators are also considering increasing the budget to

accommodate transportation to and from centralized locations within the state to allow all students the opportunity to attend camp.

Faculty members teaching sessions in the camp were pleased with the results and are willing to assist with the camp again next year. After meeting with the camp counselors, it is recommended that more minority faculty within the college be involved with camp sessions since most students attending the camp are minority. Furthermore, an introductory session on the basic of forensic science and how to gather evidence will be incorporated at the beginning of the camp to help students see how the camp is organized. This will also help students understand better the crime science activity that is conducted on the last day of camp.