

**Agricultural Education Research Summary Report**

**Factors Influencing Minority Enrollment in  
Agricultural Education – A qualitative study in an  
Urban School in Illinois**

prepared by

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# **Factors Influencing Minority Enrollment in Agricultural Education – A qualitative study in an Urban School in Illinois**

## **Introduction**

The purpose of the research summary report is to provide an overview of a research project to investigate factors that influences urban minorities students to enroll in agricultural education courses. This is part of continual research that will be done in the state of Illinois with the idea of increasing minority membership in agricultural education. This qualitative study was designed to receive feedback from highly populated high school with minority students that would identify those problems that serve as obstacles to the successful retention of minority students in agricultural education.

This research project attempted to determine what changes may be needed to increase minority participation in agricultural education in the state of Illinois, to determine minority students' involvement in agricultural education and to ascertain their ideas to what would help in the recruitment and retention of minorities in agriculture. This project was supported by a grant developed by the Facilitating Coordination in Agricultural Education project staff and funded by the Illinois State Board of Education.

## **Objectives**

The overall goal of this research project was to ascertain minority students' perception of agricultural education and its programs in the state of Illinois.

The specific objective were:

1. To determine who/what influenced the student to enroll in agricultural education courses.
2. To determine what personal or organizational factors most influenced the student to participate in agricultural programs.
3. To determine the perceptions of minority students toward Agricultural Education Programs in recruiting and retaining underrepresented population.

## **Background Information**

“By the year 2000, the U.S. workforce will be over 50% female and non white because of a low birthrate of white males. If we do not educate and train enough skilled workers in these groups and bring them into the work force, the U.S. cannot be a competitive force among the industrial nations. The policies generated by this emphasis on human capital will be based on equal opportunity, not equal outcome. Fighting poverty, educating the poor and culturally diverse work force are basically economic issues – the development of human capital and the management of human resources. This will render racial,

ethnic, and gender differences inconsequential. Empowerment will automatically be available to all who want to take advantage of affirmative opportunity to become skilled. Moreover, preference programs will automatically phase themselves out. The demand for skills will drive work force selections and determine outcomes” (T. Brown, 1992, p.12).

The United States Census Bureau (Higher Education, USDA, 1990) has predicted that by the 21<sup>st</sup> century the American work force will depend on its nonwhite population. Whent (1997) stated that as the U.S. agricultural educators plan for the future with an increasingly diverse population, and prepare to serve a global economy, there is a great need to recruit and retain members of diverse populations in agricultural programs.

There have been several studies in recent years to determine factors that should be initiated to assist in the recruitment and retention of minorities in agriculture. Talbert (1996) found in his studies that gender, minority status, and socio-economic status were not statistically significant factors in enrollment decisions for minorities in agriculture. He found that enrollment seem to be based on careers related to that program. Wardlow, Graham, and Scott (1995) in a qualitative study conducted in a rural community in Arkansas concluded that minority agricultural professionals believed that exposure to careers in high school influenced students’ career decisions and that role models of the same ethnicity can also have an influence. Talbert (1999) goes on to say that people make choices partially based on factors of social class membership, home influences, school, community, pressure groups and role perceptions. Nichols and Nelson (1993) reported that Hispanic population tends to view agriculture negatively. Talbert and Larke (1993) further defined the problem in noting that black and Hispanic students tend to have more negative attitudes toward the traditional components of agriculture. The agricultural sector is the foundation of any society, but in the U.S., ethnic minority participation in areas of agriculture and related fields is scarce (Foster & Henson, 1992). They go on to say that demographic trends indicate that ethnic minority populations are increasing; and more of these students must be recruited into agriculture careers in order to sustain the agricultural industry for the future and to help ensure that the U.S. remains competitive in the global economy.

Hoover, Scanlon (1991) stated that in 1976 enrollment in agricultural education secondary school programs nationally was at an all time high of 697,000 students, however, in the past 12 years agricultural education enrollment has dropped 27% nationally. This drop in enrollment averages between 1 – 3% annually. They found in their study that students felt that agricultural education would not be of any future value to them and that classes were too production oriented. They also found that agriculture is perceived as a white male organization and for individuals from farms. Bowen (2002) goes on to say that only 4% of FFA members are African American. Hispanics count for 17% of the FFA’s membership. He goes on to state that African American membership in the FFA is one third what it was in 1965 (18,291 in 2001 vs. 52,000 in 1965). The most compelling information found in Bowen’s research can be summed and referenced to the research at hand, when he states, “one reason for this disturbing decline can perhaps be traced to the decline in the number of African American secondary teachers

that occurred when segregation ended in the 1960's. With fewer African American teachers to serve as role models, the white teachers who replaced them have not maintained the African American presence even though FFA chapters are now located in 10 of America's 15 cities, most of which have significant African American Population" (p. 6).

### **Assumptions**

The researcher assumed prior to the study that there would be an increase in knowledge for African Americans to pursue careers in agriculture. It is also assumed that high school counselors and non-agricultural teachers do not do a good job of introducing students to the various fields of agriculture and the many career options available.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study was based on model from Humanistic Psychology. In this study the researcher focuses on his/her experience of the phenomenon and the essential experience of others who also experience the phenomenon intensely. There are two focusing or narrowing elements of heuristic inquiry within the larger framework or Phenomenology. First, the researcher must have a personal experience with and intense interest in the phenomenon under study. Secondly, others who are part of the study must share an intensity of experience with the phenomenon (Patton, 1990). Patton stated that the researcher would come to inquiry with the co-researchers as they also intensively experience and reflect on the phenomenon in question. This model provides a basis for explaining why the researcher chose to study the factors that influences minority students to enroll in agricultural education.

### **Methodology and Procedures**

Qualitative methods were conducted using focus group discussions. The focus group formats were chosen because of the subjects dealt with in this study. The research visited the school several times prior to the focus group to develop rapport with the students. The target population for the study was African American students enrolled in agriculture. Krueger (1988) stated that focus groups are meant to bring people together with similar interest or expertise, to share their perceptions and ideas on a topic. He also stated that the most critical stage of the interview is in the first few moments when conducting a focus group interview. Krueger also mentioned that the focus group is more personable and holistic and people like to talk about themselves if they feel the time spent is worthwhile and their stories will be safely confidential.

The focus group interview was tape recorded and then transcribed by the researcher.

## Findings

The first research question was to determine who/what influenced the students to enroll in agricultural education course. The questions that were asked to answer this objective were:

1. What would it take to get all of you interested in the FFA?
2. Name some careers in agriculture?
3. How do you think others perceive agricultural courses?
4. How many of you are planning on going to college?
5. How many of you want a career in agriculture?
6. Why did you get in this class?
7. What do you think you can get from agriculture?

Their responses are listed in table 1.

**Table 1. What influenced you to enroll in an agricultural education course? (n =32)**

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- We had no other choice but to sign up for this agriculture class.
  - The teacher had a lot to do with us being involved in the agricultural education course.
  - Curious about the FFA.
  - I like the labs.
  - FFA films
  - Career possibilities in agriculture
  - Several students stated that other teachers only care about getting a paycheck. They do not care about the student
  - Going to college
  - It was required
  - To learn about plants, soil, horses, biology, wood science, machine operation and farming
  - Can do a lot in agriculture
  - Money in agriculture
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Many of the students agreed with several of the responses to the question asked. Their greatest response to the question was that the class was required. The least responses were their curiosity about the FFA.

The second research question was to determine what personal or organizational factors most influenced the student to participate in agricultural programs. The questions that were asked to answer this objective were:

1. How many of you are in the FFA and why?
2. How many of you are interested in agriculture and what it has to offer?
3. What can you gain from your participation in agriculture?

Their responses are listed in table 2.

**Table 2. What personal or organization factors most influenced you to participate in agricultural program?**

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- The involvement of the advisor
- Curiosity due to there being no FFA program
- Only 8 out of 32 stated that they knew a lot about agriculture
- Ability to travel
- Ability to make money
- It is exciting
- Planting things
- Welding
- Careers in welding, computers, medicine, agricultural science

The third research question was to determine the perceptions of minority students toward Agricultural Education Programs in recruiting and retaining underrepresented populations. The questions that were asked to answer this objective were:

1. What do you think would draw more minorities into agriculture?
2. Tell me a little history about minorities in agriculture?
3. What do you think would draw more minorities into agriculture?
4. What do you think minorities can gain through their involvement in agriculture?

Their responses are listed in table 3.

**Table 3. What are the perceptions of minority students toward agricultural education programs and its emphasis in recruiting and retaining minorities?**

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- There are not a lot of blacks in agriculture so they chose not to participate
- Would become involved if there were more fun stuff like computers, labs and greenhouse work (they do not have a greenhouse)
- Not aware of the history of Blacks in agriculture
- Feel as though no one recruits minorities into agriculture
- Too many people not from their race
- Don't want to be the only black face at agricultural events
- Agriculture is very creative, the way they find out how wet the soil is, how you can tell plants from each other and learn about environmental changes.
- You can gain a lot from agriculture
- Agriculture should inform minorities more, help them to understand and help them gain a greater appreciation for it.
- I use to think of farming, but now I hear that agriculture is a diverse field
- We need to be reached before junior high school. We need to be made aware of what agriculture is.

## **Conclusion/Recommendations**

Based upon the findings of this study, the following conclusions were derived:

1. Increased emphasis need to be placed on urban schools that promote agricultural education. i.e. professional development workshops, monies for program development and equipment, and field trips for urban students.
2. A more positive projection of agriculture needs to be implemented in urban school.
3. The study needs to be replicated with Thornridge and Thornwood High Schools (Chicago) and other urban high schools highly populated with minorities to determine the differences in responses based on socio-economics and regional aspects.
4. A longitudinal study should be conducted at these urban schools to better understand how perceptions of agriculture change over time for the entering 9<sup>th</sup> grader to graduation.
5. Studies should be conducted to better understand the relationship between urban and rural schools based on length of the agriculture program and the length the teacher has taught at that school.
6. Students need to be presented with the historical documents of Blacks in Agriculture and the FFA and given the opportunity to participate in various activities sponsored by the FFA.
7. Students would like to see more minority involvement in agriculture.
8. Agricultural classes as well as the FFA may need to work toward providing more methods of increasing the sense of belonging for minorities.
9. Agricultural teachers are responsible for the recruiting and retention of minorities in agriculture.

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