

Ag Education in a Diverse World

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2021

To say the year 2020 was quite the rollercoaster ride would not be an overstatement, for it is 2020 that was marked by numerous events: a global pandemic, divisive politics, and the unfortunate all-access pass to our kitchen for months on end. What we've lived through has been historic indeed, and while many of these events can easily be credited to COVID-19, Coronavirus is not the only thing that made 2020 historically significant. For among the mess of COVID-19, a call to action has been resurrected: the need for diversity. Now, I'm not trying to get political, nor am I condoning or condemning the actions or beliefs of anyone, but when diversity essentially becomes a nationwide objective, it's not uncalled for to take a step back and examine the relevance such a movement has to you. In 1999, Montana State University professor Carl Igo and his writing partner James D. White wrote in the Agricultural Education Magazine that future generations of FFA members would be predominantly urban as opposed to rural, while few members would have a link to farming and even less linked to production agriculture. Years later, when we step back and examine agricultural education and FFA, we're confronted with a sad reality: though Igo and White's forecast wasn't completely wrong, it certainly wasn't prophetic.

Diversity in agriculture education has remained relatively stagnant over the past two decades, and there exists an urgent need to address and take action to ensure a different future. So today, we are going to discuss exactly why diversity in agriculture education is even a topic of discussion, next we will examine the current steps being taken toward addressing this issue, before finally, determining exactly what we need to do in order to increase diversity in agriculture education.

Now, I don't want to give off the impression that agriculture has hardly diversified in any capacity since 1999 because that would be a misrepresentation. In 2010, Jonathan Knutson wrote in an Ag Week publication that 11 of the 20 largest cities in the United States offered agriculture

classes and FFA Chapters while each of the 50 states plus Puerto Rico offered an FFA Chapter. One year later, it was reported that 18 of the 20 largest cities in the United States offered agriculture classes and FFA Chapters, a growth of sixteen percent. These statistics sound pretty great, right? It wouldn't be weird to assume that urban areas have seen a growth in FFA Chapters since then—especially considering the fact that FFA membership has increased by over 200,000 members since 2011. Yet, statistics can't account for everything. They can't account for the fact that when I talk to my friends from the Springfield Public School District, none of them have heard of FFA before, and they can't account for the fact that even within the Willard Public School District whose student population is made up of both rural and urban students, FFA is still viewed as “the weird farm kid club.” But if this doesn't sound legitimate, maybe this will: October 2, 2020, Successful Farming Newsletter wrote that African American involvement in FFA has steadfastly remained around 4% since the 1990s. Moreover, according to the official FFA website, 87% of recent agriculture education graduates are white. The need for diversity within agricultural education doesn't just apply to one area, rather, it is embedded within several facets of agricultural education.

But how are these issues currently being addressed? FFA has taken several major steps toward inclusivity and diversity in recent months. On June 5, the National FFA Organization made the decision to remove a former national officer from his position in response to insensitive and inappropriate comments and posts on his social media platforms—decision that set a monumental precedent for the expected behavior of FFA members and members of the agricultural education community moving forward. Additionally, the National FFA Organization recently released a plan called Agriculture Education for All—an initiative that aims to

intentionally make agriculture education more equitable, inclusive, and diverse through the implementation of new policies, programs, procedures, and training.

But what can we do? How can we help our chapters be more equitable, inclusive, and diverse? Now, please don't start getting defensive; I'm not about to ask you to delve deep into your psyche and realize and reflect upon the deeply embedded biases that plague all people regardless of whether they realize it or not. No, but I am going to ask you to make diversity and inclusion a priority. As FFA Chapters and agricultural education members, it's imperative that we are extremely intentional about the words that we say and the actions we take. As an FFA Chapter member, I have seen first hand the normalcy of racist jokes and purposeful pushback against those who are different within my chapter and others. According to Robin Horstmeier, former Sweet Springs High School agriculture teacher, "...for any social change movement to be successful there must be commitment from both — the people (grassroots movement) and the top in leadership positions." In order to cultivate diversity in agriculture education, we must encourage that change. The National FFA Organization has taken steps toward inclusivity and diversity, but these endeavors require follow through from students. As advisors, officers, and chapter members, it's up to us to cultivate that change.

Although the year 2020 was most certainly less than ideal, it did bring a few good things. Wearing sweatpants is an acceptable fashion choice for more places than the grocery store, and my little brother finally started covering his cough. But aside from that, diversity and inclusivity were brought to the forefront of our minds, and FFA realized the need for diversity within agriculture education. There are still a lot of changes to be made, and the efforts we saw last year are only just the beginning. But we're on the right path, and if we stay on it agricultural education will be stronger and more diverse than ever before. Acclaimed American poet Maya

Angelou once said, "In diversity, there is beauty and there is strength." It is up to us to plant this change.

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