

The Elephant in the Room: Examining the Ethnic Profile of Students in Agricultural Education

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Introduction/Need for Research

Addressing diversity is increasingly important in the 21st century as the United States continues to see a rapid change in demographics (Talbert & Edwin, 2008). While the United States population has become more racially/ethnically diverse and school populations have followed, agricultural education programs have failed to see the same change (Bowen, 2002). Understanding the current demographics of agricultural education programs can help to address research priority four of the American Association of Agricultural Education (AAAE), by examining “the role of diversity and multiple perspectives in meaningful learning across agricultural education contexts” (Doerfert, 2001, p. 9).

While the demographics of FFA chapters have been examined (Lawrence, Rayfield, Moore, and Outley, 2013; LaVergne, Larke, Elbert, & Jones, 2008; Luft, 1996; Vincent & Torres, 2015), a review of available literature revealed a lack of ethnic demographic data for all students enrolled in agricultural education programs. This study is a portion of a larger study examining the 2010 high school graduates in [State], and was developed to describe the ethnic makeup of secondary students both enrolled in agricultural education and as a complete cohort group.

Theoretical Framework

A high level of diversity in scholastic settings can lead to higher student performance in both learning outcomes and societal democracy (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Vincent & Torres, 2015). This study was conducted based on the model of diversity inclusion developed by LeVergne, (2008). LeVergne based his framework on Gay’s culturally responsible teaching concepts, combined with the views of multicultural education by Salend (2008) and Banks (2008). The resulting framework highlighted inclusive classroom and school cultures and incorporation of all students in a program as factors leading to an agricultural education program with inclusive diversity.

Methods

This descriptive study was conducted ex post facto using pre-existing data from the [State] Public Educational Information Management System (PEIMS). The analysis included a census of $N = 305,988$ students who were enrolled in the educational system in [State] continuously from 8th grade until expected high school graduation in 2010, for schools where agriculture courses were offered. This group of students is classified as a “cohort group” by the [State] Education Agency and did not include students who entered or relocated out of the [State] educational system at any point between 8th grade and an expected graduation date of 2010. The use of a cohort group provides a method to track only those students who were present in the [State] educational system for middle and high school.

Specific data used for this portion of the study were student ethnicity and number of agricultural education courses taken. Frequencies and percentages of students by ethnicity were calculated for both the entire population and for those students who were enrolled in agricultural education courses for two or more semesters. Information about students who enrolled in agricultural education courses for only one semester was not included in the provided data. Lack of available information regarding students enrolled for a single semester is a limitation to this study. Data were managed in MS Excel[®] and IBM[®] SPSS[®] version 22 was used for analysis.

Results/Findings

The ethnic breakdown for the entire 2010 cohort students ($N = 305,988$) was found to be: 43.0% Hispanic/Latino ($n = 131,570$), 34.8% White ($n = 106,632$), 13.4% Black/African American ($n = 40,987$), 2.9% Asian ($n = 9,005$), 0.4 % American Indian/Alaskan Native ($n = 1,355$), and 0.1% Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander ($n = 285$). An additional group of students were classified as being from two or more races ($n = 3,577$, 1.2%), or had a race which was unidentified ($n = 12,577$, 4.1%).

Of the total population of students in the 2010 cohort who attended high schools where agricultural education courses were offered ($N = 305,988$), 13.9 % ($n = 42,598$) were enrolled in at least two agricultural education courses between 8th grade and expected graduation. The students enrolled in agricultural education had the following ethnic breakdown: 57.3% White ($n = 24,399$), 30.5% Hispanic/Latino ($n = 12,991$), and 7.8% Black/African American ($n = 3,339$), with less than 0.1% of students reporting ethnicity as Asian ($n = 234$), American Indian/Alaskan Native ($n = 201$), or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander ($n = 5$). In addition 1.1% of students identified with two or more races ($n = 470$) or were unidentified ($n = 959$).

Conclusions, Implications, Recommendations

Results of this study highlight a discrepancy between the ethnic makeup of all students in the 2010 cohort ($N = 305,988$) and the students in the 2010 cohort who were enrolled in at least two agricultural education courses ($n = 42,598$). While Hispanic/Latino students represented the higher percentage of students in the 2010 cohort (43.0%), White students represented the highest percentage of students enrolled in at least two agricultural education courses (57.3%). This parallels previous findings noting lower enrollment of minority students in agricultural education and FFA (Lawrence et al., 2013). Although a less diverse group of students are enrolled in agriculture classes than the school population, these findings do not show a discrepancy as large as some studies examining diversity with FFA membership compared to school population (Lawrence, et. al., 2013). This may indicate that there is a group of minority high school students who are enrolling in agricultural education courses, but not choosing FFA membership.

Further research is recommended to examine the causes of the discrepancy in ethnic makeup between all students and those who are enrolled in agricultural education classes. Understanding what might be responsible for the change in ethnicity could provide insight to agricultural educators on how to recruit different ethnic groups to enroll in their classes and create a more diverse environment.

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