

History of Agriculture Course in an Agricultural Education Program

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Introduction of the Idea

The importance of and need for agricultural literacy has continued to grow in the United States in recent years. This task is often the responsibility of agricultural educators, communicators, and extension personnel found within universities, public secondary schools, communities, and a host of other outlets (Enns, Martin, & Spielmaker, 2016). One strategy for helping university students become more agriculturally literate is offering a History of American Agriculture course as part of their program of study. However, courses specifically focused on American agriculture history are offered for students in a limited number of university agriculture programs in the United States (G. Moore, personal communication, December 1, 2016). Although this course is but one approach to enhancing agriculture literacy, the potential for future creation and adoption of such courses at other universities could enhance agriculture literacy on a larger scale.

Steps in Course Design

The History of American Agriculture course was taught at two different universities: Colorado State University (CSU) and the University of Tennessee at Martin (UTM). CSU initially developed the course during a one-year period, and it has been taught twice. UTM worked with CSU in developing key elements in a nearly identical History of American Agriculture course, and it has been taught once. The 16 week course had to gain approval from the university curriculum committee. The course was granted core content status as fulfilling student's history course requirement at CSU. UTM is in the process of gaining approval for the course to fulfill student's humanity course requirement. The following paragraphs outline the most unique features of this course at both universities: content and assignments.

The content of the course focused on three ideas. First, the course included content focusing on the historical introduction of different techniques and key milestones of agriculture in the United States. The time period included pre-Columbian agriculture through events in the 1980's related to agriculture in the United States. Second, the course included content that centered on agrarian ideas (ideologies) throughout American agriculture history. These included Jefferson agrarianism (late 1780-1850s), romantic agrarianism (1830-1860s), southern agrarianism (1930-1940s), neo- agrarianism (1970s-now), and agrarian populism (2000s-now). Finally, the course connected how past events are linked to the agrarian ideas of the era and how these ideas shaped the future of agriculture. The course had two textbooks (Danbom, 1995; Hurt, 2002). UTM also included a day long agriculture history field trip in which students experienced nearby historically significant persons, locations, and artifacts.

The other unique feature of this course was the assignments. In particular, the unique assignment for both institutions was an ongoing (semester long) "hands on" history project. Traditional history courses require end of the year historical research project. This appeals to some students. However, the designers of the course recognized that other students wanted a chance to engage in historical research in different ways. The course allowed students to choose from four different final project types:

Innovative Idea

1. Traditional historical research paper (at least 13 page paper)
Example: The impact of the green revolution on farm sizes
2. Media Projects (Complete video, audio, print project with at least 4 page reflection paper)
Example: Visual history of real cowgirls
3. Oral history project (Interview transcripts and at least 9 page paper)
Example: Remembering when horses still ruled: A retired farmer interviewed
4. Historical restoration project (Work with restoration group and at least 3 page reflection)
Example: Rebuilding the historic Joplin grain elevator

Results to Date

The course has been offered two times at CAU and one time at UTM. The students of the courses were very favorable of their experience. The ratings for the course at CSU were high, ranging between 4.42 and 4.84 (out of 5.00) for instructor and course ratings for the two offerings. The ratings for the course at UTM were similar, ranging between 4.25 and 4.65 (out of 5.00) for instructor and course ratings for the one offering.

Qualitative student feedback from both universities were generally positive as well. Students who completed the course described the course as “engaging to make the topics interesting” and “learning about the history of agriculture and how it has evolved over time.” Students also found the experiential nature of assignments as appealing, describing the course as an opportunity to “experience the topics” as opposed to just hearing about them. Many of the students also appreciated the uniqueness of the final project which allowed them to do something more than just a traditional history research project. Some negative comments were also received from student completers. Some students described the scope and length of assignments as being “too much” or “too long” for a three-hour undergraduate course.

Future plans

College administrators want to increase the student capacity at both institutions so that the courses can be open to every freshman in the college of agriculture. The department head at UTM would like to create and offer a section of the course as a general elective for non-agriculture students. UTM will also offer this course as an online dual-enrollment course for high school seniors during the Fall 2017 semester. The timeline of scaling up this course depends on the resources of each department. Furthermore, expanding this course to the general campus community will require approval and passage by academic governing bodies.

Costs/resources needed

The financial cost of this course is fairly low as compared to any other course of study. The most expensive financial cost was the day long agriculture history field trip at UTM. The field trip cost was approximately \$600 for using the university’s 28 passenger bus to transport students to each location of the excursion. The real cost of this course in many cases would be dedicating a faculty member or instructor with the background knowledge and time to teach this course.

References

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