

AGSPOSURE: An Intervention to increase Agricultural Awareness among Minority Youth

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Introduction and Need

The National Research Council [NRC] (2009) recommended that colleges of agriculture designate more recruitment efforts toward students with diverse and non-traditional backgrounds to assist with filling the nearly 58,000 annual job openings for graduates obtaining bachelor's or higher degrees in the agricultural sciences and related fields (Goecker, Smith, Fernandez, Ali, & Theller, 2015). "Additionally, while agriculture has been traditionally associated with rural communities, increasing the number of students from urban and suburban areas can be beneficial, as less than 5% of the U.S. population resides on farms and only 20% reside in rural communities" (Scherer, 2016, pp. 2-3). A consistent underrepresentation of minorities in agricultural related disciplines has existed historically (NRC, 2009). When reviewing the rate at which high school students enrolled in secondary agriculture courses in Texas, it was found that personal reasons such as socioeconomic status, family issues, and school factors often discouraged students and acted as barriers (Talbert & Larke Jr., 1995). However, the presence of teachers and other educational leaders who share minority students' racial or ethnic backgrounds affects their school achievement in positive ways (Marshall, 1989).

African Americans represented roughly 11% of the total enrollment of higher education institutions in the United States at the beginning of this century (Burns, 2006). Challenges exist, however, for underrepresented minorities in finding academic programs with which they are comfortable. For example, Anderson II (2006) found that "[u]nderrepresented minorities tend to struggle to find instructors, classmates and programs with which they feel a connection" (p. 11), which is assumed to be related to the weaker performance of some students.

With African Americans representing 13% of the nation's population, universities have developed various recruitment strategies to increase the number of African Americans interested in higher education (Burns, 2006), with mixed success. However, if students are exposed to agriculture, it increases the possibility they will enroll in an agriculturally related major (Donnermeyer & Kreps, 1994). Hytche (1992) asserted that to increase minority representation in the agricultural sector and its allied fields, initiatives should target efforts in four areas: early intervention, pre-college intervention, college, and post-baccalaureate programs. The need Hytche identified persists until today; therefore, *AGSPOSURE* seeks to engage youth at the early intervention and pre-college stages of their personal and career development.

How the Program Works

AGSPOSURE'S mission is to empower minorities and underserved communities by exposing them to the world of agriculture and inspiring the creation of opportunities for personal and professional growth. We are currently working with at-risk youth attending an inner-city high school in Oklahoma. More than 80% of this high school's student population is African American and many students come from low-income families. Due to the economic challenges facing many of the students, participation in *AGSPOSURE* was encouraged by offering free membership. The program's members are in grades 10, 11, and 12. Each member is assigned a mentor and receives a gardening kit containing a hand-painted terra cotta pot, potting soil, an

oregano or parsley plant, and herb care directions. The gardening kit is sent home with the members to give them the opportunity to grow their own produce and encourage healthy eating habits. *AGSPOSURE* partnered with a student organization at Oklahoma State University – ENACTUS – that sought to support acts of social entrepreneurship by assisting aspiring entrepreneurs. The participants’ mentors are minorities who work in the agriculture industry or have obtained a degree in agriculture or a related science. Members attend meetings monthly at their high school. These interactions not only introduce aspects of the agriculture industry and the variety of careers associated with it, but also provide the students opportunities to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes in other areas, such as acts of community service, entrepreneurship, financial literacy, goal setting, and mental health resiliency. *AGSPOSURE* also provides a supportive network for these youth by devoting programming to the *challenges* and *victories* they experience daily. The program’s overall goal is to provide youth multiple opportunities to learn about the agriculture industry while also empowering them with learning experiences and access to adult mentors to assist in their personal development as well as improvement of the local community.

Results to Date

AGSPOSURE’S members joined with the idea of agriculture consisting of only farming, but through the program they have come to understand better the industry’s importance and diverse array of career opportunities. The students have learned to connect agriculture to their daily lives ranging from the clothes they wear, to the skin and hair products they use, to the food products they consume. Members have expressed appreciation for the support received from participating in the program, and shared positive experiences with their gardening kits. Many students even name the plants and express that emotional bonds develop with their mini-gardens. Teachers at the partner high school have also communicated the positive impact of integrating *AGSPOSURE’S* programming into their school, and the students are developing new ways to encourage their peers to join. The members have also taken the initiative to improve their community by planning service projects, including beautification and pollinator garden development at the school, gardening kit giveaways to residents of a local adult living center, and visiting a Boys & Girls Club to discuss how agriculture impacts the lives of all children.

Future Plans and Cost/Resources Needed

AGSPOSURE will continue to pursue opportunities to support at-risk minority and underserved youth by further developing programs to connect them to the agriculture industry while providing a nurturing environment that encourages their pursuing positive career and life choices. For example, future planning includes educational field trips to farms, ranches, agribusinesses, and higher education institutions with agricultural programs. Resources are needed to provide transportation to take members to these locations as well as help them attend monthly learning sessions. *AGSPOSURE* seeks to expand membership at its initial school partner and grow to include other high schools as well as middle and elementary schools. To date, the gardening kits have been produced at a cost of about \$15 each and given to participants. *AGSPOSURE’S* developer has supported her own travel to and from the school where the programming has occurred. Potential supporters are being solicited to increase the program’s sustainability with the aim of cost-recovery and eventually making a profit in the long-term.

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