

**Deep Roots: Giving Voice to Underrepresented Postsecondary  
Agricultural Education Students**

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## Introduction

There is a need for diverse educators from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds in the agricultural education profession (AAAE, 2019). Although white teachers can connect to their ethnic minorities, Bates (2013) posits that a barrier of safety is removed when the teacher reflects the same racial and/or ethnic background as their students. In addition, educators of similar backgrounds to their students provide a true sense of belonging in connecting students to the field of study (Vincent, et al., 2012).

Success rates of racial and ethnic minority students in college are influenced by on-campus social support, off-campus ties, and the collegiate environment (Baker, 2012). Throughout their career as undergraduate students, a gap exists in the retention rate of minority students as compared to their white counterparts (NSC, 2017). Retention efforts of minority students is essential to improve a deficiency existing within Agricultural Educators (Foster, et al., 2020) and such efforts must be intimate and sincere. Such relationships will provide crucial support for fostering a safe and open environment for racially and ethnically diverse students.

## How it Works/Methodology

In an effort to increase retention of minority students, The University of Kentucky developed a monthly program purposefully serving racially and ethnically minority students in the agricultural education undergraduate and graduate program. *Deep Roots*, as the group was coined, serves three purposes: 1) to increase networking through the agricultural education profession with minority faculty and teachers; 2) to empower students to have voice within the major; and 3) to develop a social connection with other minority undergraduates and minorities becoming a part of the agricultural education profession. In addition, the overall mission of *Deep Roots* is to create on-campus support and safe environments, specifically pursuing minority students affiliated with agricultural education.

Students are personally invited, via university email, to monthly meetings which include guest speakers in the profession. Speakers serve as inspirations to students and grant students a sense of belonging within the context of agricultural education. As experts in the field, they encourage students to continue pursuing a profession of their passion, in spite of the lack of minority representation currently within the field. Hearing from similar lived experiences, students gain a sense that they are not alone. A faculty member and assigned graduate student serve as mentors and are present at all meetings and assess the students' requests and organize each monthly meeting and discussion. After hearing guests speak, students engage in a debrief, among one another, led by the graduate student and the university faculty member. Students also discuss current events, their experiences as a minority in agricultural education, and other department events. In these meetings, students have the opportunity to network with other students, thus empowering a support system that is present. To keep in the spirit of a student-led, additional students are welcome to attend if invited by someone within the cohort.

The ARCS model of motivation (Keller 2010) can be used to explain student motivation to attend meetings. Student attention is gained by inviting experts who can facilitate conversations. Relevancy is present due to shared lived experiences of students and guest

speakers. Confidence is gained when students build relationships and understand they do belong within the profession. Satisfaction is achieved when students feel heard by the department and gain belonging. The combination of these factors explains why students initially attend meetings and continue to be present.

### **Results to Date/Implications**

Students have built relationships through similar shared lived experiences and are exposing vulnerabilities with each other, thus gaining belonging and efficacy. The moments are allowing students to build meaningful relationships. A student involved with the group explains, “It’s amazing to know we have a safe space to talk about our experiences and hear from others so we can uplift and support each other. It’s something I’ve never experienced before, and I have built the best relationships/friendships ever through this group.” The relationships built within the organization are equally important to professional development gained by participation in meetings. Undergraduate students have benefitted from having a safe place to share critical conversations of being an ethnic minority in a profession which is highly homogenous in its racial representation. Although the work of the group is positive, it is unknown if it will lead to a larger minority representation within the teaching profession and the undergraduate degree program.

### **Future Plans/Advice to Others**

Future plans include more guest speakers and additional meetings when virtual diversity workshops are held. Upcoming events will explore initiatives within 1890 institutions and exploring creative programs to assist the undergraduate student allies within the major. Faculty interested in such programming should first develop a relationship with their minority students that encourages open communication and voice within the department. Such measures that build trust are serving on department committees, provide opportunities to facilitate discussion among peers, and hold one-on-one discussion about culture, heritage, and belonging. The assigned graduate student takes an active leadership role in communicating with invited guests, collecting feedback from attendees, and support ideas for the group. This trust between the leadership of the organization and faculty advisor creates the safe space which is essential to the success of *Deep Roots*.

### **Cost/Resources Needed**

There is not a high cost associated with the *Deep Roots* cohort. Finger foods are typically provided for the meetings; however, it is not a requirement. The more important resource needed for a similar minority support group is time, space, technology, and purposeful intent. Time is needed to invite guest speakers and to attend the monthly meetings. Space, a meeting room of any capacity, is needed to host meetings. Technology can be useful in inviting guest speakers into meetings, although speakers can also be invited to attend in person. The university primarily invites speakers virtually, via Zoom, to invite speakers from across the country.

## References

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