

African American Agriculture: The Development of a One-Credit-Hour Weekend Course

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Introduction and Background

African Americans have made significant contributions to the agricultural industry (Balvanz et al., 2011; Moon, 2007). Yet, many of those contributions have failed to make their way into curriculum resources, and others are largely nonexistent (Hurt, 2019). As a result, minority representation remains lacking in secondary agricultural education curricula (Vincent & Torres, 2015). Therefore, curriculum is taught from a White perspective. What is more, the majority of secondary agricultural education teachers also identify as White (Smith et al., 2019) further exacerbating the problem of avoiding African American agriculture altogether.

W.E.B. DuBois, a prominent philosopher, stressed the need to educate aspiring teachers about African American culture (King, 2019). DuBois believed a failure to emphasize intentional preparation in this area would result in a perpetuation of ignorance for future generations (DuBois, 1973). Banks (1993) indicated that African American agricultural history should not be taught through a White perspective. Rather, it should be presented in such a way that it highlights the accurate perspective of the minority group being emphasized (King, 2019). Therefore, we sought to develop a course that represented the authenticity of African American agriculture and highlight the contributions African Americans have made to the industry since the early 1600s.

How It Works

At Oklahoma State University, faculty are allowed to develop one-credit-hour weekend courses for undergraduate students. Often, such courses are developed that address a particular skill that is absent from the curriculum or to provide students with additional experiences related to course content. The lead researcher, an African American female, developed a course for pre-service agricultural education teachers on the topic of African American agriculture. Using experiences, she received while working at an 1890 land grant university and additional research, she developed course content and assignments necessary for a one-credit-hour weekend course. AGED 4990: African American Agriculture was developed to teach students first-hand about the history of agriculture from an African American perspective.

The purpose of the AGED 4990: African American Agriculture course was to examine the African American experience within the conceptual lens of agriculture in the United States from 1619 to the present. The course emphasized the past and current experiences that have and continue to affect black people engaged in the agricultural industry. As a course objective, students compared and contrasted the experiences of African Americans involved in the agricultural industry. Additionally, students summarized and interpreted the significant economic, political and cultural forces that influenced the African American experience in the United States and agricultural industry, writ large. After completing the course, students were expected to demonstrate their knowledge about developmental, historical foundations, and lasting contributions of African Americans to the agricultural industry.

Results to Date

The two-day inaugural AGED 4990: African American Agriculture course was developed and taught to undergraduate students in the Agricultural Education, Communications, and Leadership

Department at Oklahoma State University in Fall 2020. Fifteen students participated in the class. Day one consisted of lectures, videos, and worksheets related to African American agricultural history. Day two consisted of students engaging with African American agriculturists through panel discussions, individual interviews, and guest speaker presentations. As an additional assignment, students were assigned an African American agriculturist who had made significant contributions to the industry or a substantial moment in history for African Americans as they navigated through agriculture. After receiving this assignment, students researched and developed a brief presentation about the person or topic area assigned to share with the class. After making the presentation, students fielded questions from their classmates during an open-discussion period.

To assess the course's impact, each student completed an assessment worksheet prior to and at the end of the two-day course. The assessment worksheet captured student beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions related to African American agriculture. When evaluating these assessments, it was revealed that through these personal interactions and exposure to content, students were able to assume transformational learning experiences by being made aware of various aspects of African American history. One student majoring in Agricultural Education expressed the benefits of taking the course by saying: "I learned the resiliency of black people in agriculture, the absorption of the NFA, viewpoints from black people involved in agriculture. . . In the future, this class will help with me [with] being more inclusive in the classroom." Numerous students also expressed a new and growing appreciation for this part of history after taking this course. A student majoring in Business Marketing stated: ". . . [I]t is paramount to study African American agriculture. I probably would not have said that before I took the class. I don't even think it is important just for Ag Ed majors, but all agriculture and even business [majors]. . .". Grounded in the thoughts expressed by students in the course assessments, the course was an opportunity to explore an area of agriculture they were initially unfamiliar with and could perceive the benefits of this experience moving forward.

Future Plans and Cost/Resources Needed

One aspect of the course that was planned was a daytrip to the George Washington Carver Memorial site in Diamond, MO. This aspect of the course was planned but not permitted due to the global COVID-19 pandemic that occurred during the course's duration. Future plans will include a field trip to the Memorial site to observe exhibits, read artifacts, access lesson plans and ideas, and hear stories told from curators about the life and impact of George Washington Carver on agricultural production and innovation as a scientist, educator, and humanitarian. Future plans will also include exploration of recommendations to extend the course content throughout an entire semester as well as expanding the credit hours offered to satisfy university diversity requirements.

Costs of the course are assumed by students paying tuition for the course. The tuition dollars support the purchasing of curricular materials. The one-credit-hour weekend courses at Oklahoma State University serve as overload hours. As such, the dollars generated are sent to the respective department and then shared with the instructor-of-record as salary for teaching the course. Therefore, the cost associated for teaching the course is self-sustaining.

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