

Increasing diversity in Cooperative Extension by improving diversity in the pipeline

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Introduction/need for innovation or idea:

One of the primary issues limiting diversity in US Cooperative Extension (CE) organizations identified at the 2020 National Extension Directors Association annual meeting was the lack of diversity in the pipeline of prospective students (VCE 2021). A Virginia Tech (VT) Institute for Critical Technology and Applied Science diversity grant program provided an opportunity for VT and Virginia State University (VSU) to explore development of a cross-institutional course to introduce more students to Cooperative Extension across both 1862's and 1890 Land Grants as a way to diversify and strengthen this pipeline therefore creating a Cooperative Extension system that better reflects the diversity of the communities it serves. This poster highlights the results of this initial exploration which has resulted in a cross-institutional course being offered and supported across the two institutions in Fall 2021. The course is an overview of Cooperative Extension as it applies to non-formal education for citizens and communities. A basic premise of the course is that all students have the opportunity to be involved in Cooperative Extension either professionally or as a stakeholder in their post-graduation life. The course will provide a strong background and basis for further development of understanding of what Cooperative Extension is, the benefits it provides and challenges it faces as well as the role all members of communities play in enabling the development of strong educational programming tailored to meet local or regional needs. Resources and partnerships between both 1890 and 1862 Land Grant Universities are leading the way in introducing a more diverse group of students to Cooperative Extension as a viable career and academic pathway (Comer 2006, Dorsey 2001, Vines 2018). This course supports key goals and strategies related to diversity, workforce development, partnerships and collaborations and more from the Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Organizational Effectiveness Plan created and approved by subcommittees across VCE (VCE 2021).

How it works/methodology/program phases/steps

This course has been offered since 2014, but expanded to the cross-institutional format in Fall 2021. Undergraduate students and faculty from both VT and VSU met virtually through Zoom. Course faculty included Dr. Karen Vines (VT) and Dr. Marcus Comer (VSU) plus one graduate teaching assistant (Carolyn McGraw) and one undergraduate teaching assistant (Maggie Daly). This course was 3 credits and met virtually twice a week for 75 minutes each day. In addition to regular class times, four daylong field trips were included. Module topics include Evolution of Extension, Extension Today, Program Planning, Comparative Analysis of other state Extension programs, and Future of Extension. Assignments included group discussion posts, oral reports, group assignments and reports, personal reflections, team participation evaluations, and more. A great deal of work went into scheduling guest speakers to join the class virtually via Zoom for various topics and modules. Guest speakers included county agents, specialists, district directors, administrators and current and past Extension directors. Students repeatedly examined the VCE organizational chart to connect these professionals with their role in Extension.

Results to date/implications

Students were invited to participate in focus groups at the conclusion of the course, hosted by a non-biased campus group trained in conducting focus groups (Baum 2021). As a result of this course, students have indicated a better understanding of how VT and VSU work together to

form and implement VCE. Students had a chance to network with students from another university's culture, community and program offerings. In focus group results, students indicated the field trips and networking opportunities were highlights of the course, and reasons they would recommend this course to other students (Baum 2021). Planned in-person field trips gave students the opportunity to see Extension in action, and network with Extension professionals of all levels of the organization. During the course, students toured a county Extension office, a 4-H Educational Center, an Agricultural Research and Extension Center, and a university research farm. Challenges associated with field trips include transportation, coordinating guest speakers at sites, student conflicts with other courses, and arranging catered meals for students.

Virginia Cooperative Extension faculty that participated in the course had positive feedback about their interactions with students, and most indicated that they would be willing to return for future course offerings. These staff showed interest in the collaboration between the two universities, and shared great insight with students about how the two universities work together to form VCE. The teaching team involved has developed a team teaching guide from learnings implicated from this course that will be presented and published separately. This was a highly collaborative and team-focused initiative, and such a format led to higher innovation, new ideas for moving forward, and new perspectives from all involved.

Future plans/advice to others

Working cross-institutionally has been a great success this semester, and has added a whole new dimension to the course. There are a variety of future plans and potential expansions of this course. The plan is to offer the course in the same format in Fall 2022, implementing lessons learned from this semester to improve weak areas of the course. The teaching team is communicating with VCE leadership to discuss future possibilities and areas for expansion, including certificate programs, fellowships, collaboration with other states and more. A goal for Fall 2022 is to recruit more VSU students now that the course has run once at that university. We are also considering marketing to expand reach to undergraduate students outside the traditional home college of VCE, and also to increase enrollment of graduate students.

Costs/resources needed

Costs associated with this course include renting vans for transportation and meals totalling ~\$1800. These costs were covered by VCE. The ICTAS grant also provided course support through assistantship and work-study for graduate and undergraduate students and miscellaneous material costs. A team of students worked during spring semester 2021 to identify ways to incorporate both university identities into the course for prospective students. Members of the teaching team met weekly to prepare for the upcoming week, work through field trip travel details, discuss successes and areas for improvement, prepare modules for uploading to Canvas, and troubleshoot any other tasks as needed. The same attention was given when scheduling guest speakers; contacts from both universities were included to give students a holistic view of how VCE functions. A graduate student and undergraduate students provided support in the ongoing course implementation; both of these students were from VT because the department at VSU did not admit graduate students at the time. This is a consideration for future growth and expansion of the course.

References

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