

# **Perceptions and Understanding of Race and Racism Among Agricultural Education & Communication Students**

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### **Introduction/ Need for Research**

As society continues to grow more diverse and global, it is imperative for college students to become comfortable, educated, and ready to engage with multicultural communities, both inclusively and equitably. Specifically in the realm of agricultural leadership, where agriculture and natural resource (ANR) students will soon serve as community, education, and industry leaders, it is imperative that these young leaders understand the role and impact of race in the lives of the populations they serve. For centuries, diversity, equity, and inclusion have been an area of weakness within the agricultural sector (Myers et al., 2004; Wright, 2003). In alignment with the *Strategic Goal #1* of the AAAE 2017-2020 Strategic Plan focused on *building a more inclusive culture within society*, this study explored the research question of, “What is the perception and understanding of race among undergraduate students enrolled in an Agricultural Education and Communications course amidst amplified racial tension and unrest across the United States during Fall 2020 and Fall 2021?” As ANR continues to work to embrace diversity, it is imperative to explore the perception and understanding of race among students as they work in, build, and lead in an increasingly nuanced and diverse society.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework utilized in this study is Helm’s (1995) theory of racial identity development that highlights awareness of race as a “necessary starting point” from which individuals must first understand themselves as racial beings, which can provide an overall awareness that can disrupt racist assumptions and affect diverse race relationships. Through the process of acknowledging the existence of racism, individuals can develop racial awareness that can potentially increase the ability to recognize and combat bias (Hays & Chang, 2003).

### **Methodology**

The methodology used for this research was a qualitative content analysis of an online discussion forum of students in an Intercultural Communication course. The following questions were posed to students in a weekly online discussion post: 1) In your opinion, in what ways (if any) have race and racism impacted society today? 2) How do you see the concept of racism illustrated in your life today? 3) Do you think the concepts of race and racism have become more prevalent in present day society (2019-2021) than in the past? Responses were reviewed by researchers utilizing an In Vivo thematic coding process. Student responses were not acquired for research until the end of the academic term in which students were enrolled in course. Additionally, students were not required to participate in this research, but were still able to participate in the discussion post.

### **Results/Findings**

A total of 37 students participated in this study and submitted discussion post responses for data collection. Data shows that 36 out of 37 students believed that racism is a current issue. A student stated, “In recent years, I feel that the idea of ending racism and bringing awareness to the effects of it has become a huge part of our modern society. In the past, I feel there was less of an urge to bring attention to racism.” Additionally, 26 students stated that race and racism was more prevalent in present day (2019-2020) society than in the past. The remaining 11 students believed the establishment of country laws requiring equal treatment of races to be a sign that the issue of racism had improved in the United States. A student commented, “As our connections to others become more interconnected and widespread due to advancements in technology, people are more vocal and aware of racial injustice more than ever before.” This student and ten others stated that racist incidents are communicated more effectively due to more developed crisis response via social media, and believed this showed an improvement in racism in society. Although responses varied among the previous perspective, all participants identified that racism is still prevalent in society. Additionally, all students identified that race and racism impact their daily lives and society.

### **Conclusions**

This study identifies that undergraduate college students are cognizant of race and racism, at varying levels, and believe they impact daily lived experiences. Additionally, overall findings suggest that students want and need more opportunities to unpack and interrogate the topics of equity, inclusion, and race as these topics, and their impact, are embedded into the fabric of society. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are at the core of the mission of most higher education institutions, particularly for public universities, where there is an institutionalized commitment to uplifting the well-being of the state and surrounding communities. Within this growing global society, it would behoove the field of agriculture to understand, develop, and support multicultural communities, which includes being able to engage with and understand the impact of race on communities. Agriculture and natural resource students who will soon serve as community, education, and industry leaders are a great place to start.

### **Implications/ Recommendations/ Impact on Profession**

The implications of the research show a need for the topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion to be discussed within agricultural education and communication courses. This research study was carried out at a large predominantly white institution in the southeast region of the country, and as such, student perspectives may be unique to the location. Future studies can examine a larger population of students across the country to compare perspectives and identify common areas of learning and development around race, equity, and inclusion within ANR students. Finally, as the need to center conversations on diversity and multiculturalism persists, it may be useful for ANR

programs and departments to establish DEI components in all coursework to illustrate the impact of DEI across areas of expertise, topic, and subject area.

### References

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