

Building Professional Collaborations between Community College and Land Grant University
Faculty

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More than a decade ago, the National Research Council (2009) challenged agricultural education professionals to transform their relationship to the evolving global food and agricultural enterprise. While recent improvements have been documented (DiBenedetto & Myers, 2016), technical and community colleges have often been overlooked and underserved (Fabris, 2019). Community college leaders “recognize that specific ‘skills’ are important but limited, and that what matters in the long run is equipping students for adaptability and success in the broadest terms” (Fallows, 2019, para 6). With this in mind, Auger (2019) makes an important observation: “We know that some skills are more lasting. Skills like leadership, collaboration and communication are usually described as soft skills, but they should be referred to as durable skills” (para 4). Of critical importance to agriculture’s workforce, “employees who have the underlying durable skills can be taught and retaught job skills more easily as needs, jobs, and careers change over time” (D2L, 2019, p. 4). However, research suggests durable skills are “more difficult to train for and are not easily assessed” (D2L, 2019, p. 4).

Despite these challenges, Mars (2015) found “potential benefits associated with the development of interdisciplinary agricultural leadership curricula that supports the training and development of entrepreneurial leaders who can effectively forge and advance agricultural innovation” (p. 178). Furthermore, DiBenedetto and Myers (2016) report that “improved resources and support for educators, those ultimately responsible and held accountable for student achievement, will assist in creating solutions to better prepare students to be career ready in the 21st century” (p. 28). Many programs have a solid foundation to build from, as evidenced by a recent review of an Agricultural Technology associate degree program (Duncan et al., 2019). Furthermore, emerging programs are primed for success, as can be seen with new agriculture specializations at community colleges (Fabris, 2019; Graham 2019). However, many community college faculty “have little time or support to attend national conferences where they might benefit from workshops or presentations about teaching and learning” (Nagy & Gilbert, 2021, p. 185).

Agricultural educators have an opportunity to bridge the gap by refreshing existing workforce development curricula to meet the needs of the 21st century agricultural industry. Because land-grant institutions have been designed to support public interests, the faculty at those institutions may be charged with extending their efforts to serve more localized academic programs, such as those at community colleges. More specifically, opportunities exist to design, develop, and evaluate leadership curricula for technical and community colleges to prepare the agriculture workforce for effective leadership in an increasingly diverse environment. The example project has three specific objectives:

- (1) Enhance an agricultural technology program’s core curriculum with practical skill development in collaborative leadership appropriate for workplace success;
- (2) Adapt and extend collaborative leadership curricula for use with the community college agriculture workforce training programs; and
- (3) Create reusable learning objects that allow application of the collaborative leadership curricula in food and agricultural sciences programs at other community, junior, and technical colleges/institutes.

How it Works

As noted by Nagy and Gilbert (2021), “by investing in community college faculty, classroom reform can occur that supports student success” (p. 195). This project involves the following major phases: (I) Develop and pilot the collaborative leadership curriculum for use with the Agricultural Technology associate degree program; (II) Conduct a formative and process evaluation to clarify needs for further attention and development; (III) Adapt and pilot curricula for use with a statewide community college system; (IV) Implement an outcome evaluation that promotes ongoing monitoring and adjustment; and (V) Disseminate reusable learning objects for use by other institutions. The efforts are designed to produce curricular resources for food and agricultural sciences programs at community, junior, and technical colleges/institutes. Employers benefit from a workforce effectively trained in evidence-based practices of collaborative leadership. In return, society benefits from a well-managed and sustainable food system.

Results to Date

As the project enters phase II, current accomplishments include evaluating and piloting collaborative leadership curricula. During an initial step, a focus group of participants validated the Association of Public & Land-grant Universities (APLU) report on employability skills (a.k.a. durable skills; Crawford & Fink, 2020a, 2020b). Thirteen community college faculty from nine colleges are piloting curricular enhancements related to three topics: teaching professionalism, asking questions, and incorporating rubrics. For the Agricultural Technology program internship, new assessment and feedback are under development. In addition, an Agricultural Technology first-semester seminar has been enhanced to include leadership development. These early successes are being connected to related literature on university and community college partnerships (e.g., Biggs et al., 2018; Halpern et al., 2018), so that we can leverage the work toward future success.

Future Plans

As the multi-phase project progresses, the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) model for improvement (Langley et al., 2009) provides an overarching framework for piloting, evaluating, and implementing curricular changes across multiple sites. Additionally, project evaluation efforts will shift to an outcome evaluation approach, assessing impacts at the Reaction, Learning, and Behavior levels of the New World Kirkpatrick Model (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016, 2021). In the third year of the project, emphasis will further shift to adaptation and refinement of curricular resources. In the fourth year of the project, the community college faculty will complete their pilot testing of the refined lessons and curricular resources. In the fifth year, evaluation work will continue, and the project team will package updated versions of the curricular resources in the form of reusable learning objects for broader distribution.

Costs

Supported by a \$500,000 grant from the USDA-NIFA Agriculture and Food Research Initiative - Education and Workforce Development program, this five-year grant includes six key personnel, two partnerships, as well as participant cohorts. The funding is helping to incentivize participation and overcome barriers highlighted in previous research on faculty partnerships between colleges and land-grant universities (e.g., Stephenson, 2011).

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