

Cultivating a Community for Rural Agricultural Leaders

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Introduction/Need for Idea

“The challenges in rural communities are increasing in frequency, complexity, and intensity, requiring the need for effective rural leadership that is practical and capable of addressing multifaceted issues” (Avant et al., 2013, p.53). Within the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at NC State University, rural students make up 34% of undergraduate enrollment. Our college students who come to us from these rural communities often have dreams and ambitions of returning to those communities to live, work, and lead. However, transitioning to a large university can be an intimidating experience for many of these rural students. Rural communities often have populations that are a fraction of the size of the student population at NC State University which can lead to further disconnect and isolation due to the perceived lack of “community.” In addition, rural students struggle both academically and personally as they seek to gain new study skills, navigate campus, and make new friends. The Rurally Engaged Agricultural Leaders Program (REAL) provides rural students the opportunity to develop their leadership skills and minimize noted challenges by networking with other rural college students. Additionally, students participate in both personal and professional development centered on agriculture and rural engagement. To align with the land grant mission, program leaders provided students with experiences to expand their knowledge and contend with those “Think and Do” components, equipping them with the necessary tools to achieve success at the university, foster leadership potential, and amplify their contributions to rural communities.

Furthermore, universities must strive to seek out or prepare students who understand the challenges facing rural communities and will advocate for these pressing issues as they lead within their families, communities, careers, and organizations. Undergraduate agriculture students need opportunities to develop professional networks and gain further understanding of the breadth of agriculture across our state so that they can become capable leaders. In NC’s agricultural leadership continuum, youth begin learning about leadership through 4-H and FFA then transition to membership and officer roles within various campus organizations. However, this leadership development is somewhat fragmented. Commonly, after graduating, these future leaders in agriculture have few opportunities for continued leadership development as early career agriculturalists. This program fills the gaps and needs in the North Carolina agriculture leadership continuum while preparing the future leaders of rural North Carolina communities.

How it Works/Methodology

Through an application and interview process, students applied for the program. Applications were reviewed by a panel of NC State University alumni and program leaders from rural communities. Thirteen students were selected to participate in the program. The cohort is made up of nine different majors and students are a balance of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. In addition, students were required to be from rural communities and enrolled in an agricultural degree program. Twice a month, the cohort participants meet as a group to engage

with guest speakers on various leadership, agriculture, or rural topics. Guest speakers either come to our campus or students travel to various locations via university vans. Another component of the program is an Extension experience where students work directly with an Extension specialist or agent to address an applied research or Extension topic that is impacting agriculture or rural communities. Based on their interests students are paired up by program leaders with an Extension faculty member. This involvement combined with these twice-monthly sessions provides students with the needed skills to further explore topics and reinforce the importance of inquiry and analysis in their personal and professional roles after graduation.

Results to Date

At present, thirteen students are participating in the program, from thirteen different rural counties across North Carolina. Twice a month, the cohort participants have met as a group. During these monthly sessions, participants engaged with rural leaders throughout the agricultural industry, received guidance regarding personal leadership assessments, and engaged in discussions related to pressing issues facing rural communities. Guest speakers and field trips included locations and leaders from NCSU, NC A&T University, NCDA, USDA, Farm Bureau, The Grange, Institute for Emerging Issues, Agromedicine Institute, commodity groups, Agricultural Sciences Center, and others who have a vested interest in the success of rural, agricultural communities. For the extension internship, students have been placed at thirteen locations with faculty ranging from county Extension agents to statewide Extension specialists.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

The faculty directors have sought out funding to continue the program for an additional year. This will allow for further development and refinement of the leadership programming and extension internships. It is recommended to have a multidisciplinary group of faculty to deliver the program to assist with both the educational, extension, and evaluation aspects of the program. The multidisciplinary team takes turns leading program sessions so that one faculty member is not expected to facilitate every meeting. Based on the feedback, field trips should be a priority.

Cost/Resources Needed

For the first year of the REAL program, the cost was approximately \$20,000. This included \$14,000 to support a graduate assistant who assisted with scheduling speakers, partnering career mentors and Extension professionals with students, creating evaluations, and coordinating all meetings including any travel. The additional \$6,000 was used for leadership assessments such as the MBTI, DiSC, and IDI, guest speakers, additional workshops, and the materials/supplies needed. Also, students participated in book clubs and were provided with *The Truth About Leadership* and *Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century*.

References

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