

**“Blazing the Trail” for the Future: BIPOC Students’ Experiences with Colleges of  
Agriculture**

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## **“Blazing the Trail” for the Future: BIPOC Students’ Experiences with Colleges of Agriculture**

One of the most widely discussed topics in America has been diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI; Mehta et al., 2020). DEI has also been an issue within agricultural education, as data have shown that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) have been severely underrepresented at all educational levels (Hartmann & Martin, 2021) and agricultural education has been slow to react (Horst & Marion, 2018). Consequently, many have advocated for changes to help increase BIPOC representation over the years (Bowen, 2002). Understanding BIPOC individuals’ motivations for choosing to pursue education and careers in agriculture can provide helpful information to colleges of agriculture looking to recruit, retain, and prepare students from underrepresented groups. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the factors contributing to BIPOC students’ choice to major in agricultural-related disciplines. This research aligns with Priority Three of the AAAE National Research Agenda (Roberts et al., 2016).

### **Methods**

The target population for this qualitative study was BIPOC students enrolled in colleges of agriculture in Arkansas. As participants had to meet specific criteria, purposive snowball sampling was used, and the sample consisted of six undergraduate students enrolled in agricultural degree programs in Arkansas. Three participants attended the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville, while the other three attended Southern Arkansas University. Data were collected via one-on-one interviews using a semi-structured interview guide, which was organized to allow the interviewer the opportunity to ask probing questions and guide the flow of the conversation as necessary (Flick, 2006). Each participant was asked about their experiences and to describe their motivation for pursuing postsecondary education in agriculture. Data were collected during the fall 2021 semester, and interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached. The conceptual framework used in this study was Strayhorn’s (2013) College Choice Model.

### **Results**

Participants discussed two major themes during the interviews: (1) reasons for choosing their major and (2) barriers faced by BIPOC students in agriculture. Regarding reasons for majoring in agriculture, participants pointed to involvement in youth-based organizations, School-Based Agricultural Education (SBAE), and identification of a mentor. Four participants had participated in either 4-H or FFA, and one explicitly identified their membership as the major factor influencing their decision to major in agriculture. SBAE courses played a role in influencing half of the participants who reported finding their passion primarily through agriculture classes in their high school. They stated that interesting coursework and in-depth explorations of agricultural careers sparked their interest in pursuing agricultural degrees. However, mentorship was the most influential factor on participants’ choice to pursue a degree in agriculture. Every participant identified at least one mentor who heavily influenced their decision to pursue agriculture as a career; mentors ranged from parents to family friends and industry professionals.

Participants also discussed barriers faced by BIPOC students in colleges of agriculture, which included stereotyping, lack of minority representation, and finances. Participants reported that these barriers impacted them before and during their university enrollment. Most participants identified having experienced some type of stereotyping from various sources, including classmates, potential employers, and family members. Overwhelmingly, participants reported exposure to the stereotype that minorities have no place in the agricultural industry. One participant stated, “I think it's sometimes not being taken seriously, just kind of like, why are you here?” Additionally, multiple participants reported experiencing microaggressions related to the stereotyping of BIPOC individuals in agriculture; one participant said, “...having to deal with that every day, it just kind of builds up until you want to break.” Lack of BIPOC representation in majors was also a barrier, where all respondents reported a low sense of belonging and feeling unwelcome among their peers. Participants were not comfortable speaking up in class when they were the only minority, with one stating they “stick out like a sore thumb.” Finances were another common barrier reported by participants. One student postulated that a lack of generational wealth is a major barrier to entry in agriculture that minorities face at a higher rate than Caucasians, and a scholarship could easily be the deciding factor in whether or not a BIPOC student attends college.

### **Conclusions & Recommendations**

This study provided a glimpse into the financial and social burdens placed on BIPOC students within colleges of agriculture in Arkansas, however, the findings of this study only represent the experiences of participants and should not be generalized to all BIPOC students. While each participant’s experience in their respective college was different, all perceived that achieving an agricultural degree was more difficult as a minority student, as the results revealed that these BIPOC students faced many challenges entering and remaining in colleges of agriculture. Throughout the interviews, it became evident most of the participants were first generation college students who were from economically depressed areas and backgrounds. The BIPOC students who choose to “blaze the trail,” as stated by one participant, face many challenges and do so for many reasons: some individuals desire well-paying, successful careers; some want the opportunity to help others; and others chose this path to prove their critics wrong. Minority students in predominately White universities, specifically in colleges of agriculture, must embody qualities such as perseverance, adaptability, and resolve in order to overcome barriers and endure in the face hardship.

To better recruit, retain, engage, and prepare BIPOC students, colleges of agriculture should be intentional in their efforts to connect with all communities, not just those common among their student bodies. Furthermore, helping BIPOC students alleviate the financial barriers associated with college would be beneficial. BIPOC students should be better educated about existing scholarship and financial aid opportunities, specifically those targeting underrepresented groups. Stereotyping of and microaggressions against BIPOC students in colleges of agriculture are major issues. To combat this, colleges of agriculture should prioritize cultural competence training for students, faculty, and staff within the college. Lack of minority representation also plays a key role in making BIPOC students feel welcome. Colleges of agriculture should attempt to showcase BIPOC students and faculty through different channels including college and departmental newsletters, social media, and various other forms of publications.

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