

Urban School Partnerships: Plans, Progress, & Pitfalls

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Introduction

The importance of urban agriculture in Dallas, Texas and its adjacent neighbors is characterized by two recent actions: the opening of a Farm Service Agency office in Dallas County (USDA Public Domain, 2020) and the public release of the *Comprehensive Urban Agriculture Plan* by the City of Dallas Office of Environmental Quality and Sustainability (2022). Fernandez et al. (2020) predicted 59,400 average annual openings for degreed professionals in food, agriculture, natural resources, and the environment during 2020-2025. As a result, innovative strategies for engaging urban youth in AFNR courses and experiential learning activities are essential for increasing and diversifying the pool of students seeking higher education in AFNR disciplines. The American Association for Agricultural Education research values “Ensuring Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging” and “Nurturing Positive Youth Development through Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources Systems” guided the planning and initiation of a school-based agricultural education (SBAE) partnership with three urban high schools in Texas (AAAE, 2023).

Goals for this project include: (a) increased number of urban SBAE students pursuing agricultural-related majors at community college and university level, (b) increased experiential learning opportunities in urban agriculture, (c) increased expertise for urban SBAE teachers, and (d) develop stronger institutional relationships between urban high school, community college, and university faculty and staff. The planning and proposal development for this recently funded large-comprehensive initiative was the result of a planning grant under USDA’s *Capacity Building Grants for Non-Land-Grant Colleges of Agriculture* which result in a project with a start date of September 2023 and end date of August 2026.

Steps/Phases

Faculty from Texas A&M University-Commerce identified and purposively selected three urban high schools within its service area that offered SBAE courses. SBAE teachers from the three schools had participated in a planning process do develop a large comprehensive initiative. Each high school is only one of several within large, complex districts. Key activities planned for each campus as well as A&M-Commerce are described below.

Nimitz High School will expand its experiential learning activities to include food production enterprises that are applicable to existing courses. This will include the establishment of both in ground and raised bed vegetable gardens and a fruit orchard with dwarf varieties suited to the soil and climate. At least one community garden close to campus will be established through service-learning to foster youth civic engagement. Nimitz will also establish poultry flocks for laying and meat production that will be managed by the students in the Animal Systems program of study. This will enable students, who traditionally only see animal care in a pet context, the opportunity to care for food animals that are suitable for urban agriculture.

CityLab High School will install a hydroponics system suitable for a student-based enterprise offering experiential learning in food production, harvesting, and post-harvest handling. They will also teach students food processing and preservation skills, such as canning and food dehydration. A small farm-store/community supported agriculture (CSA) model will be used to market food produced providing students to learn marketing and business skills. Additionally, student internships with local urban growers will be established.

Skyline High School will expand experiential learning activities to include aquaponics, which will produce vegetables and fish for use in the campus's Culinary Arts classes. Students will learn food production, harvesting, and postharvest handling techniques for both vegetables and fish. They will provide experiential learning activities for their students as well as facility tours, demonstrations, and instructional videos for area SBAE teachers.

Texas A&M University-Commerce will reimburse expenses through a sub-award grant of \$25,000 per year to each high school to support the activities described as well as host annual college and career awareness events. These will include annual campus tours, lunch, and meet and greet with College of Agriculture faculty for SBAE students and teachers. A&M-Commerce will also organize and host an annual Urban Ag Networking Night where urban agriculture stakeholders (agencies, organizations, and growers) and area community colleges will be invited to share educational and employment opportunities with high school students and parents.

Results to Date and Implications

Challenges with public school contractual and financial processes, difficulty hiring eligible graduate assistants, and changes in high school personnel have resulted in some delays in full implementation of the project. However, each high school partner has been able to establish some of its food production enterprise, even if on a smaller scale. A&M-Commerce is planning its first Urban Ag Networking Night and has conducted professional development workshops and tours during the Summer of 2024. One graduate assistant was recently hired with two more recruited to start in Fall of 2024. The slow start has allowed for more thoughtful discussion and the inclusion of some urban agriculture stakeholders that had not been originally anticipated.

Future Plans

We aim to use project activities as a catalyst to identify more ways to engage urban SBAE students in experiential learning and urban SBAE teachers in relevant professional development with our existing high school partners and also expand to include other urban SBAE programs within the region.

Costs and Resources Needed

This project is funded by a \$749,400 grant. Each high school partner receives \$25,000 annually for three years to fund their proposed activities which require the purchase of supplies as well as some travel and professional development expenses. A&M-Commerce expenses include salary for graduate assistants, partial summer salary for project faculty, expenses for hosting events, and travel.

References

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