

Feeding America: Prioritizing Inclusion In A 21st Century Agriculture Industry

Alexandra Salinas, M.S., Jason Headrick, Ph.D.

200 Agricultural Administration Building

2120 Fyffe Road Columbus, OH 43210

(956) 802-8609

Salinas.102@osu.edu, Jason.headrick@ttu.edu

Introduction/Need for Research

The agriculture, food, and natural resources sector continuously grows and diversifies each year. The 2022 Census of Agriculture reported that over 1.2 million producers were women and nearly 235,000 producers identified as a racial identity aside from White (USDA, 2024). While the agriculture industry fills more than 22 million jobs across the United States each year, the agriculture and food sector is seen to lag behind other industry sectors when it comes to fostering inclusion and a commitment to diversity in the workplace (Kassel & Martin, 2020; Kincannon & Reed, 2021). Approximately 80% of U.S. employers commit to pursuing diversity, equity, and inclusion-focused policies and practices within their organization (Royal, 2023). Data continues to show the growth of diversity within the agriculture industry. This diversity is shown through socioeconomic status, education level, sexuality, racial identity, gender identity, etc. The question remains as to how is the industry bringing together diverse thoughts, perspectives, and backgrounds? How are we ensuring that employees' needs are being met? The purpose of this case study is to examine how agriculture-based companies across the U.S. are meeting employees' needs for belongingness and uniqueness through inclusive programming.

Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by Shore's Inclusion Framework (Shore et al., 2011). Presented in a 2x2 framework, it illustrates levels of belongingness and uniqueness intending to reach inclusion. According to the framework, there are four possible outcomes: exclusion, differentiation, assimilation, and inclusion. This study had three key terms: belongingness, uniqueness, and inclusion. Belongingness is described as "the desire to be included," and uniqueness is "the desire to maintain one's own identity" (Northouse et al., 2021). Inclusion is "the degree to which an employee perceives that he or she is an esteemed member of the work group through experiencing treatment that satisfies his or her needs for belongingness and uniqueness" (Shore et al., 2011, p. 1265).

Methodology

The central question addresses how agricultural industry leaders assess employees' needs through creating an inclusive environment. This is guided by two sub-questions: (1) What are the barriers and benefits to implementing inclusive programs and initiatives within the agriculture industry? (2) What are the general perspectives of belonging from agriculture industry professionals? This study used a case study approach and a semi-structured interview guide. Participants for this study included seven industry professionals who met the following participant parameters: (1) participants must work within an agriculture-based company, (2) participants must have operations within the United States, and (3) participants must work within the DEI sector or executive leadership in the company. The following pseudonyms represented these industry sectors within the study: Michael – Agricultural Chemicals; Kelly – Agricultural Chemicals; Angela – Animal Health; Erin – Animal Health; Jim – Education and Extension; Dwight – Government, Policy, and Legal; and Ryan – Government, Policy, and Legal.

Results/Findings

SQ1: What are the barriers and benefits to implementing inclusive programs and initiatives within the agriculture industry?

Participants discussed the struggle of developing inclusive programs that are sustainable, intentional, and successful. The barriers they identified were time, developing mindsets, and

diversity looks different in every space. “It takes time to develop, to put into procedure, to put it in a policy ...” Jim stated. They shared the barrier of humans being resistant to change, with leaders not modeling inclusion, and the political climate impacting efforts. It is also a challenge to develop programs that fit employees and regional needs for organizations who have numerous branches. On the other end, a benefit included organizations seeing an increase in employee engagement where they took on active roles and increased self-confidence. Another benefit is partnerships through corporations with university organizations and amongst other large corporations. Lastly, participants discussed an improvement in metric scores when inclusive programs were in place. Utilizing internal and external benchmarking tools, engagement and belonging scores have increased widely.

SQ2: What are the general perspectives of inclusion from agriculture

Participants emphasized the value of belonging in agriculture and creating spaces for “every type of person ... every demographic ... all different types of producers ... all production methods ...”, as Dwight stated. Participants urged the industry to lean into the inclusive principles and reflect on the history of the agriculture industry. They described the industry as missing factors in telling how these programs “actually make us a better business for customers”. They urged the need for courageous leaders in the industry who will challenge traditional mindsets and advocate for visibility, recognize the “power in different perspectives,” and embrace diversity. Participants also addressed the need for colleges of agriculture (COA) to prepare students for the future workplace. They shared that while “this generation is a lot more comfortable with DEI than previous generations”, they also emphasized that “students who need it in order to feel welcomed are pretty prepared”. They urged for COA’s to develop partnerships with organizations in the ag industry pursuing inclusive initiatives, and vice versa. They also discussed the need for COA’s to reflect inclusion and engage in candid conversations about these challenges. They discussed that the lack of inclusive and belonging awareness translates into industry roles and stressed that “we have to address these issues at some point”.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations/Impact

This study outlines barriers that participant organizations have seen for themselves and their colleagues in the agriculture industry regarding inclusion and belonging. The benefits described can be seen as outcomes from pursuing inclusive programming that creates spaces of belonging for employees. The results of this study should be utilized as influential factors to other organizations seeking to begin this practice of inclusion, as motivation for industry leaders to continue fighting for visibility for their employees regardless of the political climate. The findings also outline the perspectives of industry professionals on the topic of belonging and inclusion across various sectors of the agriculture industry and emphasizes the role that Colleges of Agriculture play in addressing the lack of awareness amongst graduates in belonging. In a 21st century, continuously diversifying industry, students need to be equipped with the skills and mindset to serve a diverse agricultural workforce. Through the work of industry professionals, colleges of agriculture educators and students, we should come together to prioritize inclusion and continue to develop and grow the industry workforce.

References

- Kassel, K., & Martin, A. (2020). Ag and Food Sectors and the Economy. USDA ERS - Ag and Food Sectors and the Economy. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-foodstatistics-charting-the-essentials/ag-and-food-sectors-and-theeconomy/#:~:text=In%202019%2C%2022.2%20million%20full1.3%20percent%20of%20U.S.%20employment.>
- Kincannon & Reed. (2021). Fostering a diverse workforce – thoughts for success in food & ag. Kincannon & Reed. <https://www.krsearch.com/2021/07/fostering-a-diverse-workforce-infood-ag/>
- Northouse, P. G., Chrobot-Mason, D., & Roberson, Q. (2021). Inclusive Leadership. In *Leadership: Theory and practice* (9th ed., pp. 322–351). SAGE.
- Royal, E. (2023). *Many businesses say DEI is a core value, but are they following through?*. Corporate Compliance Insights. <https://www.corporatecomplianceinsights.com/dei-core-value-follow-through/#:~:text=An%20estimated%2080%25%20of%20U.S.,DEI%20strategies%20in%20their%20workplaces.>
- Shore, L. M., Randel, A. E., Chung, B. G., Dean, M. A., Holcombe Ehrhart, K., & Singh, G. (2011). Inclusion and diversity in work groups: A review and model for future research. *Journal of management*, 37(4), 1262-1289. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0149206310385943>
- United States Department of Agriculture. (2024). USDA releases 2022 Census of Agriculture data. <https://www.nass.usda.gov/Newsroom/2024/02-13-2024.php>