

**Harvesting Challenges: Teaching Agricultural Communicators About the Impact of  
COVID-19 and Immigration Policies on Labor Shortages in U.S. Agriculture**

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### **Introduction**

Labor shortages in agricultural industries have become a pressing issue in recent years, with immigration policies and the COVID-19 pandemic significantly exacerbating the problem. Agriculture in the U.S. has long depended on immigrant labor to meet the demand for planting, harvesting, and other critical tasks (Kuiper et al., 2020). However, modifications to immigration policies, especially those implemented in the late 2010s, have reduced the availability of migrant labor (Christiaensen et al., 2021). This decline has led to a reduction of specialty farms, delays in harvesting, and increased costs for farmers, threatening the stability of the nation's food supply.

The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified labor challenges in agriculture (Ryan, 2023). Lockdowns and travel restrictions limited the flow of migrant workers across borders, while domestic agricultural workers faced higher health risks (Hill et al., 2021). The pandemic disrupted supply chains and placed additional strain on the already vulnerable agricultural workforce, leaving many farms struggling to maintain operations. This emphasizes the intersection of restrictive immigration policies, and the global pandemic has contributed to labor shortages in American agriculture. The purpose of this innovative teaching idea is to explore the broader implications for the agricultural industry's future workforce.

### **How it Works**

For this innovative teaching idea, we leveraged the public engagement and participation model (Hetland, 2014). This approach emphasizes two-way communication through active involvement in decision-making processes. The participation model is an example of a theoretical framework based on making predictions and developing a foundation of theory. The key steps to the public engagement model include identifying the audience, clearly defining the goals and purpose of the lesson, and choosing the appropriate communication channel (in this case, an in-person class). Lastly, providing input methods for decision-making is part of the public engagement model. Overall, this model considers the knowledge, experiences, and feedback of the target group. One way this can be utilized is by framing the audience as part of the story. Showing how the issue affects individuals as consumers or as community members can increase the relevance of the message. Lastly, this model encourages the audience to see themselves as participants who can drive change by making informed choices or advocating for policy adjustments.

The teaching strategy engaged a student-centered approach fueled by goals and objectives with an interactive lesson. Students utilized problem-based learning (PBL) to explore the effects of labor shortages on food prices, supply chains, and rural communities. Students were presented with the question, "How can farmers sustainably address labor shortages in the agriculture sector?" We separated the students into five groups and assigned a different cause to research. The topics were labor shortages because of immigration policies, rural-to-urban migration, poor working conditions, the decline of specialty crop farms, and the impacts of COVID-19. Groups brainstormed and researched these topics while presenting sustainable solutions (e.g., improving farmworker benefits, investing in agricultural technology, community-based programs). Groups then presented their findings to the class. This model helped students

approach real-world problems with practical solutions, understanding the complexity and multifaceted nature of labor issues in the U.S. agriculture sector.

### **Results to Date**

Upon completing the activity, students researched and shared information on labor shortages in different sectors of agriculture. Students engaged with their peers in five different groups and used search engines to find details and statistics on immigration policy, rural-to-urban migration, working conditions, the decline of specialty crop farms, and the impacts of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Incorporating this research activity in a classroom setting can help instill knowledge and advocacy for immigration policy. This exercise deepened student's understanding of the barriers that limit opportunities in agriculture. Students provided insight into the solutions to the five sectors which include: reducing the cost of the H-2A visa program, offering more pathways to legal status, increasing worker wages and benefits, building affordable rural housing, investing in automation and robotics to reduce manual labor, and implementing agricultural engagement courses in 4H and FFA to advocate for the issue. Students were given five minutes to research, but the class would benefit from more time. The class agreed that the time they had to study and present their findings was limited and they would have taken advantage of more research time. Students thrived from working with others. With four questions assigned to a group, each member could focus on one question and contribute that to their group presentation.

### **Advice to Others**

When teaching about the impact of COVID-19 and immigration policies on labor shortages in U.S. agriculture, it's helpful for students to collaborate with others and have adequate time to research. A key element to research is finding credible sources. Providing a list of pre-researched sources would be a helpful way of giving your students a place to start their own findings. We observed that students would benefit from more time in their groups to research different areas of labor shortages.

### **Implications**

Communicators should care deeply about this issue because labor shortages contribute to rising food insecurity. When we consider changes in labor availability, food prices continually rise and more produce goes to waste. Tackling food insecurity is a growing issue that will require change in our government and policy systems. Additionally, communicators should invest in bettering the working conditions of employees in agriculture. Further, farm jobs are decreasing in availability, healthy working conditions are declining as well. Additionally, communicators need to invest in agricultural education to combat the issue of rural-to-urban migration. The lack of health insurance, shade, adequate housing, and harsh weather elements make agricultural work less appealing to today's generations. Improving these conditions will help improve the outlook of jobs in agriculture. Additionally, it is key for communicators to conceptualize these issues to be prepared to work in policy and the workforce.

### **Costs and Resources**

Instructors will need access to the internet to display the supporting PowerPoint. Instructors should also print copies of all five group handouts. There are no other associated costs.

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