Teaching and Educational Commentary

Equity and Inclusion as Cornerstones for Building Academic Programs in Agricultural and Applied Economics

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Abstract
In this essay, we discuss the importance of equity and inclusion as necessary conditions for increased diversity in agricultural and applied economics and agribusiness (AAEAB) programs. Intentional commitment of resources and integrated strategic execution at the local (university) levels are essential if diverse outcomes and attendant benefits are to materialize.

1 Introduction

As the United States has become more socially diverse, academic programming has adapted to improve academic engagement and the overall educational experience for students, as well as support more comprehensive professional development of faculty and staff. Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are vital components underpinning our academic curricula, recruitment and retention programming, and workforce development training. On our university campuses, the agricultural and applied economics and agribusiness (AAEAB) profession and for society[1] as a whole, increased diversity yields a myriad of benefits including enhanced critical thinking for a more educated citizenry, improved racial and cultural awareness, and increased long-term economic growth and competitiveness (Milem 2003; Gibbs 2014a; McCluskey 2016; Clayton 2021).

Recent enrollment trends in Food and Agricultural Education Information System (2022) data for 2016–2021[2] indicate an overall decline in undergraduate enrollment in AAEAB disciplines at 1862 and 1890 land-grant institutions (LGIs). This appears driven mainly by decreased enrollment by White non-Hispanic students that has tended to offset increases in minority enrollment (including Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and unspecified minorities), which has trended upward since 2016. At 1890 LGI AAEAB programs specifically, Black non-Hispanic enrollment has rebounded following a slight decrease due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Mixed enrollment trends aside, projected job growth due to growing demand for agriculturalists suggests that AAEAB disciplines may have a unique opportunity to build innovative pathways for diverse talent. The "2020–2025 Prospectus on Employment" from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Purdue University (2020) show that management and business occupations make up 42 percent of the majority share of all jobs available in food, agriculture, renewable natural resources, and the environment sectors. In this article, we position equity and inclusion as central to DEI, and argue that they are essential for diverse outcomes. We are critical of approaches that merely focus on representation and that are rooted in deficit framing. The

[1] Research by Bayer and Rouse (2016), McCluskey (2016), and Yiridoe (2021) offer substantive reviews of the literature relevant to the economics and AAEAB professions.

[2] The Food and Agricultural Education Information System distributes an annual survey on programmatic trends to 1862, 1890, and 1994 LGIs. Not all institutions participate, and a few larger institutions did not respond to the survey throughout the period, 2016–2021. Also, there has been low participation among some 1890 and 1994 LGIs. However, the presented trends reveal compelling implications for the future of AAEAB among all LGI academic programs.

article contributes to existing literature by addressing these issues in the context of the AAEAB profession.

2 Centering Equity and Inclusion in DEI Initiatives

While *diversity* references social identity differences across dimensions[3] and their representation, *equity* focuses on ensuring fair treatment and access to opportunities for advancement while working to identify and eliminate barriers that limit full participation of underrepresented groups (Mercer 2021). One should not assume that homogeneous approaches would necessarily be equitable since individuals could require different resources and support for their advancement (Walters 2020). *Inclusion* seeks to create and sustain environments in which individuals of different identities are supported, and their perspectives and contributions are valued for full participation. The integration of these different elements encourages belonging and retention.

In our profession, DEI initiatives tend to focus mostly on increasing the proportion of individuals from historically marginalized or underrepresented groups. Often characterized as addressing a "pipeline" issue, this approach implies a linearity to achieving diversity by numbers where individuals appear to be included primarily for their differences to benefit the institutions. There is no substantial assessment of environments and systems to determine whether they are conducive to individuals' scholarly and professional development (Gibbs 2014b) in ways that benefit their belonging, productivity, and retention in institutions. Further, while student enrollment in AAEAB programs has diversified over time, AAEAB faculty has not (Hilsenroth et al. 2021). In general, as the student population diversifies, faculty diversity is critical for supporting long-term student success and for maintaining diverse and inclusive environments (Centeno 2021).

There is an urgent need for more effective strategies to bolster student and faculty/staff populations that go beyond merely increasing representation, which we view as a common programmatic shortcoming in DEI initiatives. Diversifying environments that are neither inclusive nor equitable is tantamount to experimentation. It is inefficient and does not facilitate retention of individuals from marginalized or underrepresented groups. Rather, it imposes high personal and professional costs on these individuals, impacting their mental health, career prospects, and lifetime earnings trajectories (Jefferson-Moore and Walters 2021). Higher education news organizations, including the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed,* have covered this phenomenon extensively in recent years. We agree with Mercer (2021) that equity and inclusion are processes which, when practiced with intention, lead to diverse outcomes. Intentional commitment of resources, robust multitiered systems of support, and coordinated execution are critical for the benefits of diversity to materialize.

Moreover, there is often an imprecision in language that distorts what diversity means and implies that it is antithetical to meritocratic principles (Gibbs 2014a). Initiatives that use deficit-based framing to emphasize challenges and remediation of individuals to fit within environments, tend to create and reinforce this perception. There needs to be a shift toward asset-based framing that recognizes the strengths and contributions of individuals before their challenges, and that also connects disparities to systemic factors that create inequity and exclusion within environments. DEI initiatives should therefore be aimed at cultivating a myriad of skills and talents, as well as promoting the full inclusion of excellence across the social spectrum with individuals from traditionally underrepresented and traditionally well-represented backgrounds (Gibbs 2014a).

[3] This includes gender, race, ethnicity, sexual identity, sexual orientation, disability, age, socioeconomic status, and national origin.

3 Local Level Engagement

We propose a broad framework highlighting commitment, structure, support, and success as four elements to assess in prioritizing equity and inclusion at the local (university) level. First, the commitment to DEI must be intentional with direction and support from administrators. There must be critical examination of department and college level policies and curricula, and of existing programs to identify equity gaps and make policy changes where necessary. Using evidence-based strategies, administrators should identify opportunities and set appropriate goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timebound (SMART) with accountability measures built in. Appropriate resources, including funding, should be assigned to initiatives that would facilitate and support equitable and inclusive environments. Each level of the academic ecosystem (administration, faculty, staff, and students) should be involved with and communicate initiatives, since the strategies would need to be executed across all levels of an institution (Martinez-Acosta and Favero 2018). An effective structure for programing will require organizational cultures that promote belonging and that focus on honing strengths as opposed to simply addressing deficits of individuals, particularly those from historically marginalized or underrepresented groups. Leaders and committees must be empowered and authorized to effect change systems within institutions and assess relevant DEI metrics across programs. Efforts must be collaborative, not duplicative, and the messaging must be coherent. Meaningful support would facilitate access to resources, and transparent and equitable treatment so that there are more opportunities for advancement, especially for those from historically marginalized groups. With elements working in tandem, success may be evident through such metrics as increased enrollment, retention rates, degrees awarded, and career placement (for students) and greater productivity, retention, and professional advancement (for faculty and staff).

4 Association Level Engagement via AAEA

As a leading national organization, the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association (AAEA) is committed to promoting a culture of engagement and supporting contributions from diverse perspectives to benefit and advance the profession. For the past forty years, the Committee on the Opportunities and Status of Blacks in Agricultural Economics (COSBAE) and the Committee on Women in Agricultural Economics (CWAE) have provided leadership on this front. Both sections have explicit missions to promote members' welfare and professional advancement, and advocate for greater inclusivity and equity within the AAEA. Recent programs include the COSBAE-CWAE Mentoring Initiative and the CWAE-COSBAE Building the Pipeline Initiative.[4] These aim for increased engagement by students and young professionals from underrepresented backgrounds, and provide framework for teaching, research, and outreach-oriented partnerships between the 1890 and 1862 LGIs. The sections also executed the CWAE-COSBAE Diversity and Culture Survey, which assessed progress on DEI metrics in the association and several agricultural economics departments at 1862 LGIs, primarily. Other notable efforts have included advocacy for and contributions to the AAEA Code of Conduct Policy and subsidized childcare at AAEA meetings.

COSBAE also formed a strategic collaboration with Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS)[5], which is a national association of minority agriculturalists at academic institutions, at governmental and non-governmental agencies, and in the industry. The organization has a primary focus on career development geared toward minorities in agriculture. MANRRS has collegiate chapters at 1890 and 1862 LGIs throughout the United States, Junior MANRRS chapters at high schools in several states, and an impressive roster of corporate partners. The goal of this partnership is to

[4] Efforts within the AAEA have since led to the establishment of a five-year diversity partnership between the AAEA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (2023).

[5] MANRRS web page: https://www.manrrs.org/.

increase minority recruitment into the agricultural and applied economics profession, while fostering more inclusive pathways to support their professional development and career advancement.

5 Final Thoughts

Although comprehensive implementation may be challenging for some academic units, we have observed that DEI initiatives that are anchored by multicultural affairs units that prioritize equity and inclusion appear to have more successful outcomes for diversity. Though not an exhaustive list, intangible supports such as cultural events, advisement, mentoring, and personal/professional development, and tangible supports including scholarships, fellowships, and developmental funding appear to strongly influence belonging and retention of historically underrepresented students and faculty. Clearly, these initiatives require engagement and changes within institutional environments and across the broader academic ecosystem. Echoing Gibbs (2014a), we maintain that diversity is critical for excellence, and that changes in language and the approach of DEI initiatives are necessary if positive spillover benefits for society are to be realized.

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