

Exploring a Global Engagement Strategy for Agricultural Education August 2009

Overview

“Agricultural Education prepares students for successful careers and a lifetime of informed choices in the global agriculture, food, fiber and natural resources systems.”

This paper addresses an emerging and weighty set of issues related to the significance of expanding the global view of today’s agricultural education students to better ensure their timely preparation for the careers and choices spoken of in the agricultural education mission. These issues are important to the many agricultural education stakeholders who deliver, receive or benefit from quality and relevant agricultural education, including teachers, students, businesses, funders and others.

Included in the following pages is the background, vision, rationale and suggested next steps for engaging and preparing students at all levels to positively contribute to solutions to the global agriculture and food issues. The National Council for Agricultural Education provides “leadership and coordination to shape the future of school-based agricultural education”, including to “proactively identify current and emerging issues of national concern and provide innovative solutions in response to” these issues. This paper addresses such issues of national and international concern and recommends initial steps for moving forward.

Background

Of the contemporary issues weighing upon the global community—nations large and small, rich and poor—those relating to agriculture, food and natural resources are among the most life-critical and overlapping in interest. The production, distribution and access to food, fiber, natural resources and sources of fuel directly impact both the quality of life for individuals and the very foundation of communal structures. Agriculture is tied to health, economics, politics, malnutrition, hunger, intercultural conflict, trade, environmental degradation, violent crime and geopolitical security. No nation is immune from the agricultural policies and practices of its near or faraway neighbors.

Agricultural education organizations such as the National FFA have, over the years, operated a number of programs that provided students with opportunities for experiencing agriculture in other parts of the world. Most of these have included individual or group travel. The former FFA Work Experience Abroad program (WEA) made it possible for students to work in an agriculturally-related enterprise in a foreign country for three to twelve months. Travel seminars of several weeks’ duration have been conducted for FFA award winners, and state and national FFA officers. While these opportunities can be beneficial, they tend to engage few students and do not generally promote awareness and understanding of the serious agricultural issues facing the global community.

Vision

The agricultural education/FFA program is the primary public schools enterprise dedicated to educating and preparing young Americans for careers in agriculture. As such, it delivers basic and advanced courses of study in the science, business and technology of agriculture. But given the mission that “Agricultural Education prepares students for successful careers...and informed choices in global” agricultural career paths, it is imperative that agricultural education provides opportunities for students at all levels to learn how agriculture affects the global community. Acquiring an appreciation for the dynamics and complexities of those issues can more fully prepare students for active roles of leadership and service to address critical needs, alleviate suffering and raise standards of living in ways that contribute to international peace and security. A vision for agricultural education global engagement is to make available a variety of opportunities that directly engage students and teachers in understanding and working to address critical agricultural issues facing the international community. These could range from in-classroom instruction to international service opportunities.

Rationale

The rationale for incorporating opportunities leading to active engagement of agricultural education students with global issues in agriculture is four-fold:

1. Moral Imperative and Responsibility

First and foremost, there is a moral imperative and responsibility for those working in agriculture to be keenly aware of the larger impact of their activities. The world faces looming crises in providing sufficient food, fuel and nutrition to a growing population. As a major producer and exporter of food and agricultural technology, the United States has a responsibility to be a leader in addressing global needs related to agriculture, including hunger, malnutrition, health, environmental sustainability, renewable fuels, resource allocation and economic development. As an economic and political world leader, the U.S. also has the responsibility to actively promote diversity and understanding within the global community.

2. Obligation to Agricultural Education Students

Agricultural education has a responsibility to provide agriculture students and teachers with an awareness and understanding of the global needs and issues regarding sustainable agriculture, food, fiber and natural resources. To understand all the opportunities available, students must be exposed to careers in global agriculture, energy and food distribution systems. They need significant growth opportunities at home and abroad for service learning related to global agriculture. Students need assistance in developing a broader framework for embracing and valuing diversity in the larger world around them.

3. Agriculture Industry Needs

Agriculture needs graduates who have an understanding of international agriculture issues and an enthusiasm for engaging these issues on a global scale. Companies in the industry need to hire those who are willing and prepared to serve overseas and gain the experience required for professional advancement and leadership positions. Workers who value and have experience embracing diversity in their workplaces and communities will be increasingly valued and sought. To remain competitive, American agriculture needs workers who can understand and respond quickly to the dynamics of the global agricultural marketplace. Lastly, agriculture leaders must be familiar and engaged with global issues to assure participation in major policy discussions and initiatives.

4. Benefits to the Agricultural Education

Incorporating opportunities to learn about global agriculture enriches the agricultural education, engaging more students and teachers by positioning agriculture as part of the solution to global issues of hunger, malnutrition, sustainable agriculture, climate change and renewable energy. Focusing on global issues adds a relevance and topical focus to the program that can help recruit more, and more diverse, students and potential teachers who would not ordinarily engage with agricultural education. It also provides a stronger platform from which to advocate for opening new agricultural education programs.

The inclusion of instruction about global agriculture adds an important teaching and student learning component to agricultural education. Global agriculture offers the opportunity to more fully integrate agriculture content into the entire school curriculum and school environment. It provides the opportunity to teach about social studies, world geography, political science, economics and history in the context of agriculture and the ability of countries to provide food, fiber and other natural resources to their populations.

Global engagement brings agricultural education into contact with a new, high-profile and well-connected set of partners, including foundations, national and world leaders, and industry supporters extending beyond agriculture. It strengthens existing programs and operations as new partners are engaged and committed. The relevance of the agricultural education program is raised by connecting with critical humanitarian and political issues facing the global community. There is potential to “internationalize” the agricultural education program by creating educational partnerships with counterparts in other countries.

Pursuing an Engagement Strategy

Under the auspices of The National Council for Agricultural Education, agricultural education can enter into dialog with potential partners in education, industry, government and philanthropy to explore global agricultural education and engagement strategies. The desired result of pursuing these strategies is that they will lead to cooperative

opportunities to involve students in the global agricultural issues of our industry, our country and our world. Requisites for partner relationships will include proper alignment of missions, values and resources. Programs with activities that engage students, individually and collectively, or leverage the delivery system afforded by the extensive public education network of agricultural education and the post secondary education network, agricultural student organizations such as PAS (Post Secondary Agriculture Student Organization) and FFA will be of greatest interest.

Strategic elements should include building upon the proven 3-circle education model (classroom/lab instruction, experiential learning and leadership development); providing global agricultural education accessibility at local, state and national levels; preparing teachers as keys to successful delivery of global agricultural education to students; integrating secondary and middle school global education with postsecondary experiences; and connecting educational experiences with real global challenges, international development, and potential career opportunities.