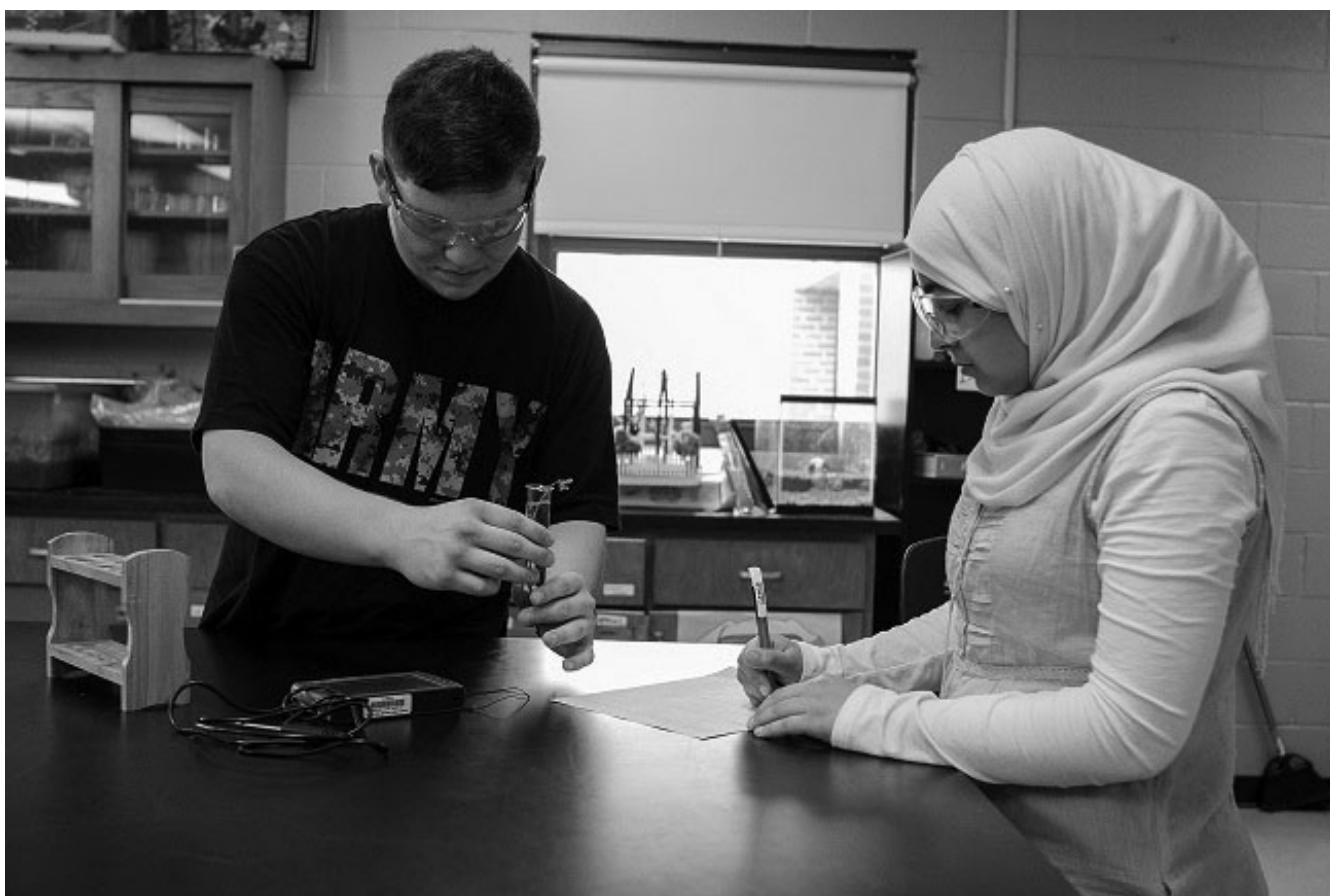


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**Workforce Development and Credentialing Our Students**

## *Global Workforce Development: Are Your Students Ready?*

by Marcus Hollan and Ebony Webber

To be more successful, agricultural businesses and organizations across the country strive to develop employees to work more effectively with colleagues from other cultures. It makes sense when you consider our industry produces, markets and delivers agricultural products via a multicultural workforce to a multicultural consumer force. In fact, multicultural consumers (members of social minority groups) are predicted to become a majority of the United States population by 2044, which means the majority of the United States workforce will also be multicultural. Are your students ready for employment in a global economy?

### **Consider This**

You take a group of students the National FFA Convention. They enjoy being away from home, touring the city, and eating meals with linen napkins, describing the experience as “epic”. During a convention session, a photo appears on the screen in which a student wears a shirt prominently displaying a confederate flag. While most of your students aren’t phased, one person, an African American sophomore sits dumbfounded. You know there are various opinions of what the

flag represents, but to her, you know it means one thing. Though she doesn’t say anything, after the session you have the opportunity to engage in a teachable moment for all of your students. Do you do it?

One of your students is a member of the Seventh-day Adventist world church and is also a member of a winning regional Career Development Event team. The next competition is on a Saturday, but this student’s religious beliefs do not support his participation in a purely secular activity on a Saturday. Another student is a member of Jehovah’s Witnesses and is elected to serve as the chapter President. Her religious beliefs do not support her saluting the American flag or reciting the Pledge of Allegiance; however, according to the FFA manual, this is part of the President’s role in the opening ceremonies. What do you do?

In your classroom sits a young student exhausted from a weekend of harvest with a pile of chores waiting for him at home after football practice. His life is the farm, school, football and FFA, all things he loves, but at night he cries himself to sleep. He’s very conscious of how he walks, talks, and interacts with classmates as well as the homophobic slurs he hears throughout the day, but has reached the point in life where his identities are not synched – his rural American cultural identity and

his sexual identity. Because he trusts his FFA advisor, he has the courage to tell you he is gay. Your response will make a difference in the trajectory of his authentic life. How do you respond?

### **Being Older than the Rest of You**

FFA advisors are asked to advise their students from time to time, as the need arises. Between racial/ethnic identity, faith/religious identity, and sexual/gender identity, agriculture teachers will encounter students from many different backgrounds. In other words, your students are multicultural. How you teach is nearly as important as what you teach. After four years of taking agricultural education courses – will all of your students be ready for the global workforce, identifying the agriculture industry as a viable option for postsecondary study and employment, and prepared to work alongside people from a different background than their own? The mark of the profession’s success is where students end up in the workforce and how they interact in a global environment. We believe instruction that is woven within the framework of diversity and inclusion (DI) will help prepare students for success in their chosen agricultural career paths.

The George Washington University defines diversity as the individual differences (e.g. life

experiences, learning and working styles, personality types) and group/social differences (e.g. race, socio-economic status, class, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, ability, intellectual traditions and perspectives, as well as cultural, political, religious, and other affiliations) that can be engaged to achieve excellence in teaching, learning, research, scholarship, and administrative and support services. Inclusion is the active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity -- in people, in the curriculum, in the co-curriculum, and in communities (e.g. intellectual, social, cultural, geographic) with which individuals might connect. Think about your daily instruction an interaction with students and do a quick DI assessment of your learning environment:

- Do the posters on the walls represent the diversity of the people in agriculture and the diversity of your students?
- Is the verbiage you use when teaching inclusive of gender and sexual identities?
- When political and social topics are brought up, do you only provide your personal, one-sided perspective?
- Do you allow phrases similar to “hit like a girl”, “Asians are good at math”, “jew down”, or “that’s gay” to be used by students?
- When racial slurs are overheard in the halls, do you correct students?

- When you observe low-socioeconomic students being bullied, do you intervene?
- When a student says “organic farming is not real agriculture” during class, do you open the floor for discussion of other viewpoints?

It turns out the need to advise students on multicultural awareness arises frequently. Your classroom is the safe zone for many students. In some cases, you are the other parental voice for students. What you say and don’t say during a teachable moment impacts far more than just a single outcome. Teachers set the standard for how students continue to live, think, and develop as young adults and later in life as professionals. How you react to situations will cause a ripple effect for years to come. Ultimately, what and how we teach our students will determine their employability, both in securing a job and keeping a job.

### **Are Your Students Employable?**

A culturally responsive and inclusive classroom is not a new concept to agricultural education, nor is preparing students with knowledge and skills needed by employers. In addition to acquiring knowledge and developing skills necessary to perform a job, students also need preparation that ensures they stay employed in a changing economy. Sound preparation for holding a career involves providing experiences that engage students’ minds and hearts in a world of diverse people, be-

liefs, and experiences. It’s not enough to say we think diversity and inclusion is a good idea, but students should also be equipped and prepared to be supervised by, work alongside, or supervise people who are culturally different from themselves. How do you provide this type of preparation for students?



*Panel Discussion: The Cultivating Change Summit Fireside Chat Panel Discussion showcased agricultural companies and organizations who are working to increase the visibility of diversity and inclusion in the agriculture industry.*

Whether we like it or not, or agree with it or not, there are numerous laws governing the treatment of marginalized populations in the workplace. Among these are the Civil Rights Act, the Equal Pay Act, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Rehabilitation Act, the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act, the Civil Service Reform Act, and the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act. Many states and municipalities have enacted protection from discrimination based on sexual orientation, status as a parent, marital status and politi-

cal affiliation. Each of these laws prohibits a variety of discriminatory practices. As a career cluster in career and technical education, agriculture classrooms should often mimic and simulate the world of work. One way to prepare stu-



*MANRRS Conference: Graduate students networking at the 31st Annual MANRRS Conference in Jacksonville, FL.*

dents for maintaining employment is to use the teachable moments highlighted above as opportunities to educate about workplace discrimination laws. In addition to informing students about their rights and protections as employees in the working world, teaching about workplace discrimination laws also helps students understand the repercussions of violating the laws. A culturally responsive and inclusive classroom does not tolerate actions and behaviors prohibited under these laws, but only the teacher can create such a classroom environment.

### **A Tale of Two Organizations**

Teachers are expected to act as experts of many topics, which is challenging. Luckily, two organizations exist that can support agriculture teachers in supporting students - Minorities in Agricul-

ture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS) and the Cultivating Change Foundation.

The mission of MANRRS is to promote academic and professional advancement by empowering minorities in agriculture, natural resources, and related sciences. As a national society that welcomes membership of all racial and ethnic group participation, MANRRS provides professional development for high school, collegiate, and professional minorities within agriculture education and the agriculture industry. From local high schools and collegiate programs to a national platform, MANRRS is single-handedly changing the landscape of the diversity in agriculture and providing young minority students the ability to feel welcomed, connected and affirmed in the agriculture industry.

The Cultivating Change Foundation is aimed at valuing and elevating Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) agriculturists through advocacy, education, and community. The Cultivating Change Summit, a capstone of the Foundation, brings together LGBTQ agriculturists (and allies) for a unique professional development conference. The purpose and goals of the Cultivating Change Foundation is to have a space to share strategies and best practices to create LGBTQ agriculture-industry equality, inclusive of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and expression. In doing so, the Cultivating Change Foundation & Summit impacts the following.

We offer the following ways you can help prepare students for the workforce, while creating a culturally responsive and inclusive classroom:

1. **Be Intentional.** Look for ways to bring students together in groups, teams, field trips, etc. Be intentional on who you are recruiting to your programs. Teachers don't wait for culturally responsive and inclusive environments to evolve – they make it happen.
2. **Immerse Yourself & Ask Questions.** If you don't know what it's like to be in cultures and environments different from what you know, put yourself in situations that immerse you into a different culture. Ask questions about things you do not know and be open to learning and seeing the world through a different lens. Both the MANRRS Organization and the Cultivating Change Foundation are great places to look to for resources and support in helping you better serve your students.
3. **Right the Wrongs.** If you hear something or witness something that does not create an inclusive environment, have the courage to intervene. Teach your students why something is not okay and the consequences of their actions.

We don't have all the answers, but we do believe there are many opportunities to make a difference for all students and prepare young people to be thoughtful, educated

and inclusive individuals. Your students will be leaders in the agriculture industry and other career areas where acceptance and tolerance will be a catalyst for getting hired and fired. As our nation and world continues to grow faint of our agrarian roots, we cannot afford to exclude students (intentionally or not) from giving their hearts and talents in order to elevate the food, fiber, and natural resources industry.



*Marcus Hollan, Executive Director, Cultivating Change Foundation*



*Ebony Webber, Chief Operating Officer MANRRS*

## ***Crazy About Co-op (Continued from page 12)***

organization exclusively for those students enrolled in the cooperative education program. We called this organization the Cooperative Education Club of Orion (CECO). The purpose of CECO is to provide an opportunity for the working student to become engaged in service activities at school as well as in the community. The learning experiences through this organization are designed to promote growth in leadership, scholarship, citizenship and occupational knowledge. The group elects officers, has quarterly meetings, conducts two community service projects and a fundraiser, and hosts an end of the year banquet. These experiences allow our coop students to be visible within the community and help promote the program to potential employers.

### **Host an End-of-Year Employer Appreciation Banquet.**

At the end of the school year, students plan and host an employer appreciation banquet for their bosses. We typically rent a banquet hall or room at a nice

restaurant and provide the meal for supervisors. This is paid for with the money generated from our fundraiser. During the banquet we give out several awards including the CECO Award of Merit (Outstanding Coop Student), Distinguished Service Award (Employer of the Year), and the Distinguished Alumni Award (for a graduate of the program who has done great things in his/her professional career). We typically invite our Distinguished Alumni Award winner to speak and share some words of wisdom with the students about the workforce. These activities help students by expanding their professional network within our community. Our students' employers appreciate this event and it is an excellent way for the students to show gratitude to their training site for allowing them the opportunity to work there.

### **Final Thoughts**

Cooperative education programs are a great mechanism for supporting the economic and

workforce development needs of a community. They provide local employers with a dependable labor supply and students with an opportunity to develop both soft and technical skills needed for the workforce - a win-win situation. While these best practices have worked for us, they may not work at every school or in every community. However, they can certainly be used as an example of one successful approach to cooperative education.



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