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Connecting Diverse Communities through a 4-H Urban-Rural Experience

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Cover Page Footnote

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Connection Diverse Communities through a 4-H Urban-Rural Experience

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Abstract. Misconceptions regarding agricultural careers are exacerbated by increasing urbanization and are one of many differences in perspective between urban and rural communities. The One Georgia 4-H Urban-Rural Experience addresses this divide through a statewide youth exchange focusing on the agricultural sector. The program includes a multifaceted look at agricultural careers through visits to urban and rural communities. Focus group evaluations revealed the impact on youth through exposure to new careers, increased understanding of the diversity of agriculture, awareness of the interconnected nature of urban and rural communities, and a sense of belonging to a diverse group of youth.

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is required to meet people's most basic needs, yet "there is a growing disconnect between the public and agriculture as demonstrated by low agricultural literacy levels" (Pinkerton et al., 2021, p. 1). Most Americans are generations removed from the farm with only 2% of the nation's population residing on working farms and 1% of the population claiming an agricultural occupation (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2015). As a result, "urbanization has transferred the future of agriculture to a group of people with an overwhelming lack of support for agricultural issues" (Kovar & Ball, 2013, p. 167). This can lead to misunderstandings regarding agricultural issues (Nordstrom et al., 2000) along with widespread misconceptions and lack of awareness regarding 21st century agricultural careers. These barriers may prevent youth from exploring agricultural careers, as many do not understand the potential to engage in the sector both on and beyond the farm. Although this may be widely attributed to urban and suburban youths, rural non-farm youths may also lack agricultural literacy (Meischen & Trexler, 2003).

The One Georgia 4-H urban-rural experience program is an educational initiative designed to address these challenges by bringing together a cohort of 24 4-H members in ninth through twelfth grade from different counties across Georgia to learn about the importance of agriculture, the state's largest economic sector. The 6-day program consisted of two sessions—one in rural Southwest Georgia and the second in metro Atlanta—where participants were actively engaged in tours, interviews, and hands-on experiences.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

4-H members were selected to participate in One Georgia to develop an understanding of agriculture and its impact across the state. The cohort included youth enrolled in 4-H from counties in both North and South Georgia that included a mix of urban and rural populations. Rural and urban counties were delineated using the official definition used in the U.S. Census Bureau; rural communities are those with fewer than 2,500 residents, and urbanized areas have 50,000 or more people (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2019). Session speakers and tours highlighted Georgia's major commodities and a variety of agricultural careers, both traditional and non-traditional. During each session, the cohort visited local state legislators to discuss agricultural issues that connect rural and urban Georgia.

Session one of the urban-rural experience program focused on traditional row crop agriculture and orchards in rural Southwest Georgia. The participating 4-H members toured a watermelon farm, peach orchard, and local farmer’s market to view the commodities grown throughout the state. The 4-H youth also visited a satellite campus of the University of Georgia and learned about cotton, turf grass, and veterinary science from Extension researchers.

The second session was dedicated to learning about livestock and urban non-traditional agriculture in metro Atlanta. 4-H members visited an urban community farm and discovered careers not traditionally associated with agriculture, including public service and transportation. Participants learned about beef cattle genetics and marketing by touring a nearby Hereford farm. To better understand agricultural policy, 4-H members met with representatives from the Georgia Department of Agriculture. The two-session program ended with a celebration at the Atlanta History Center, where youth explored the agricultural history of the city.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Qualitative methods were used to evaluate the 4-H urban-rural experience program. Specifically, data were collected through focus group interviews with participating 4-H youth following each session. Using responses to open-ended questions, focus group data were collected on youths’ experiences, changes in attitudes toward agricultural careers, and overall perceptions of the program. By participating in a group setting, youth were able

Table 1. Selected Participant Comments

Theme	Quotes from participants
Impact of Agriculture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After being a part of the first One Georgia program, it has helped me realize the far-reaching effects of agriculture. Not just in my life, but in everyone’s lives every day! • I discovered that agriculture is truly a part of my daily life, and it directly affects me in more ways than I can fathom.
Increased awareness and interest in agricultural careers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I didn’t know you could work in agriculture and not be a farmer. • One Georgia taught me even more of my love for agriculture and opened up doors to me to careers I haven’t considered. • One Georgia introduced me to career opportunities that I had never even considered, and this program prompted me to pursue my dream of becoming a County Extension Agriculture Agent through the University of Georgia.
Agricultural Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One thing that we did not know about agriculture in Georgia is the key role that the Georgia State Legislature plays in the success in agricultural economy. • I didn’t know that there was an entire department dedicated to agriculture in Atlanta.
Urban-Rural Interconnectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One Georgia allowed me to see the connections between rural and urban communities more vividly. • It is important for students (in 4-H or not) to understand the separate parts of the state both industry and agriculture and the importance of each separately and the reliance on each other for success. • The rural agriculture communities are dependent on urban communities to purchase their commodities, help develop new technologies and scientific data that will help them improve rural farm practices. Urban agriculture is dependent on rural agriculture communities often because they lack the land needed to provide the commodities needed for industry and supply for residents.
Agricultural Diversity within Georgia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The One Georgia 4-H program impacted me in many ways, it showed me the diversity of agriculture in Georgia and taught me that whether from a cotton field in South Georgia or a community garden in Atlanta agriculture is still there, and it impacts everyone. • I learned so much about how different agriculture looks around the state and how lucky we are in Georgia to have such a variety of products and jobs that have a positive effect on Georgia’s economy.
Belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being a part of the One Georgia program really helped me grow into the person I am today. • My One Georgia 4-H friends have truly become a family, and I want to give other 4-Hers the opportunity to experience this same kind of friendship and bonds. • One Georgia 4-H was one of the greatest experiences of my life. This trip was very impactful in helping me, as a youth, step up and ask our adult leaders questions.

Connecting Communities through 4-H

to share and discuss their experience in detail, providing a richness to evaluation data that may not have been obtained through written surveys. Table 1 includes selected quotes from program participants.

PROGRAM REPLICATION

The urban/rural experience program is an educational experience that provides 4-H youth a unique opportunity to explore the diversity and economic impacts of agriculture on a state. Although such an experience will vary by state, the supplemental appendix describes the schedule used in Georgia that can be used as a sample template.

DISCUSSION

Although youth may have a basic grasp of agriculture, such as the idea that food comes from farms, many lack the deeper understanding of agricultural systems needed to become informed decision makers (Hess & Trexler, 2011). As agriculture becomes more complex and specialized, future generations have more and more to learn about the policies, technology, and processes that impact America's food and fiber systems (Leising et al., 2001). The One Georgia participants' responses indicated that the program increased their knowledge about the agriculture sector in Georgia. Participants reported an expanded awareness of agricultural careers, especially for non-farming roles. Given that the average farm producer is nearing retirement age, increasing youths' interest in agricultural careers is an important step towards ensuring a robust agricultural workforce in the future (Pinkerton et al., 2021).

Additionally, participants reported a greater awareness of the interconnectedness of the state's urban and rural areas. This was an important opportunity for youth from different backgrounds to collaborate and learn about their state together, especially considering the contemporary social divides common between rural and urban communities. 4-H members spoke of the strength of the bonds formed after a relatively short time together. These relationships, along with a greater understanding of Georgia's economy and diversity, will hopefully lead to continued collaboration among communities in the future.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The lessons learned from the One Georgia program can be used by other Extension professionals to develop their own agricultural experience programs. Although the Georgia program focused on agriculture, the structure could be adapted to other sectors such as healthcare, technology, and hospitality. 4-H members can benefit from the opportunity to engage with a diverse cohort in shared learning experiences. Sector-focused programs offer youths the chance to explore careers which may not be available within their own communities and open doors to future professions. This can be an especially important experience for youths who reside in communities both rural and urban that offer fewer opportunities or have more barriers to success in specific careers. Youth experience programs are a fun and rich tool for engagement and community building, no matter the content area.

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