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Career opportunities in agriculture for minorities

One disturbing aspect of the leadership in agricultural sciences in the U.S. today is that few members of minorities are represented at professional, managerial, and administrative levels. While there are notable exceptions, the fact remains that the condition persists despite the numerous agricultural career opportunities presently open to young people.

Those of us in leadership roles in agricultural educational institutions must bear a special responsibility for this lack of minority participation in our programs. If we are ever to correct it, we must mount special efforts to enlist minorities in our educational programs. We have had notable successes in educating foreign students from Africa, Asia, and Latin America for many decades. We find our former students at all levels in agricultural research, education, and administration in countries of these regions. It is ironic that career opportunities in agriculture are not perceived as desirable by minorities native to the United States.

Various studies have demonstrated that the lack of qualifying education and an opportunity to obtain it largely accounts for the deficiency of representation by minority groups in management jobs in agriculture. It now appears that an even more serious and fundamental barrier exists—that of motivation. There is too little evidence to demonstrate that leadership opportunities in agriculture are real for minority individuals who have traditionally associated their role in agriculture with the tedious and menial tasks involved in producing and processing farm crops. Law, medicine, politics, and education have become more attractive avenues to prosperity and influence than have the agricultural professions.

It is time we correct this irony. If the U.S. is truly a land of opportunity for everyone willing to work for self-improvement, all of us must be willing to see that that opportunity is not foreclosed by neglect, discouragement, or lack of educational qualification. I am certain that the agricultural sciences need to make special efforts to assure the skeptics that real opportunities truly exist.

Two examples of some special efforts to increase the awareness among minorities of opportunities in agriculture are underway at our institution. The College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences at the University of California, Davis, has a Summer Residential Program entitled "Getting Ready for the Future" designed for individuals who have completed the eighth or ninth grade and whose future may be uncertain because of educational and/or economic constraints and the lack of exposure to career options. Also, U.C. Cooperative Extension has initiated a series of conferences for undergraduates, primarily from minority groups attending a number of non-U.C. colleges in the State to introduce them to some of the exciting potential careers in agriculture.

On the national scene it is encouraging to note that the House Appropriations Committee approved \$1,250,000 for the 1980 USDA budget for minority agricultural education grants. I sincerely hope this recommendation is sustained by the Senate and becomes a reality.

Although these programs are commendable, others need to be initiated to reach all potential students who could contribute substantially to further agricultural development.

Similar efforts must be emerging in other areas of the U.S., but if they aren't, I urge my colleagues to launch aggressive programs to tap this under-utilized resource for the future well being of agricultural programs. People who have been closely associated with agriculture know better than most the value of science and education in maintaining a healthy agricultural industry. Many of our minority families have that close association today. I feel certain that all they need to restore their motivation toward agriculture is to believe that a true opportunity for success exists.

We must demonstrate that education is the way *into* agriculture, not the way *out* of it.