What Could/Should be Done to Eliminate the Shortage of Agricultural Educators in our Country?

Currently in our great nation, we are at a shortage of agricultural or agriscience educators. Many people don’t know what an agricultural educator actually does. Agricultural educators instruct America’s youth about careers in modern production agriculture, as well as other job within agriculture such as nutrition and communication. They help improve the quality of life for all people by helping farmers increase production, conserve resources, and provide nutritious foods. The audience that this paper is intended for are those in college who do not know about the shortage of these teachers. I will discuss why we need more agricultural educators, current plans to solve this shortage, and my recommendations for it.

So why exactly do we need more agricultural educators? Ag education only serves about a million students in sixth through twelfth when there are about twenty-seven million students total in this grade range in our country (Osborne). This means there is still room to grow. Agriculture in general could also use more Ag Ed programs to help change industry perceptions and knowledge. Industry leaders have expressed a concern that there will be a lack of scientists to lead the industry in the future as well.
Perhaps the biggest reason why we are in need of agricultural educators is the shortage of skilled and technical workers for job within agriculture. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has projected a national shortage of 3,000 college graduates in food, agriculture, and natural resources careers for the years 2005-2010. They also projected that 17,000 undergraduates would be hired for these careers who did not even have an agriculture-based major; this would account for a third of all new employees hired for the industry during the period.

Currently there is something that is being done to address and hopefully help this critical issue. The National Council for Agricultural Education has developed a goal which is called “10 x 15.” The objectives are stated as follows:

“By 2015 there will be in operation 10,000 quality agricultural science education programs serving students through an integrated model of classroom/laboratory instruction, experiential learning, and leadership and personal skill development. Further, all students will be members of the FFA and have a supervised agricultural experience that supports classroom and laboratory instruction (Team Ag Ed).”

“10x15” not only sets a goal to have 10,000 programs, but it also sets quality goals for all programs. The “10x15” management team works under the direction of the National Council for Agricultural Education and also works through Team Ag Ed.
The management team has identified eight themes and initiatives for the “10x15” plan. They are manageable enough to carry agricultural education into the future successfully. I will briefly discuss these in order as the management team has listed them:

I. Program Quality Theme
The goal is to define standards for quality in agricultural education programs.
Initiatives:
1.) Program Standards for Ag Ed.
2.) Link Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Content Standards to National Academic Content Standards.

II. Innovative Program Models Theme
The goal here is to offer quality Ag Ed program models that meet needs within the community with business, industry, education, etc.
Initiative:
3.) Develop multiple Ag Ed designs

III. Continuous Improvement through Research and Evaluation Theme
Agricultural Educators will be able to constantly improve their program based on appropriate measurements and feedback.
Initiative:
4.) Program Data Reporting
IV. Highly Qualified Educator Supply Theme

Make sure that all agricultural educators are well-trained and highly qualified to work within their roles. Also, they must all be members of their professional organizations.

Initiative:

5.) Agriculture Educator Recruitment

V. Partners and Resource Development Theme

Provide as many opportunities and support as possible to business, industry, alumni, educators, parents, and members to be long-term supporters of Ag Ed.

VI. Promotion and Advocacy Theme

Create a strong brand and promotional plan for agricultural education and ensure advocacy results.

Initiatives:

6.) Agricultural Education Advocacy Strategy

7.) Agricultural Education Brand Strategy

VII. Agricultural Education Leadership Theme

Strengthen the leadership, management, and coordination of Ag Ed at all levels.
VIII. Coordinated Growth Plan Theme

That every state has a growth plan in effect that supports these national goals and initiatives.

Initiative:

8.) Program Funding Strategy

There are a few recommendations that I have regarding the “10x15” plan and resolving our shortage of agricultural educators. The main problem I have with the “10x15” plan is that teacher recruitment is not higher on the list of goals and initiatives. To me, this should be the most important step. This should start at the high school level with current teachers encouraging their students to be agricultural educators. Something bigger that I do not see is this teacher recruitment at a bigger level, such as at a University. I have not seen Michigan State University encourage and recruit agricultural educators like I believe we can and should be doing. High school students go to events like the state and national FFA Conventions and do not see recruitment tables from the University. So my recommendation is to make teacher recruitment the top priority and a way to do this would be to recruit heavily at FFA Conventions.

Another recommendation I have is to potentially get help from the government. Now I am not one to believe that government should intervene in as many problems as it does but consider the consequences. Simply put, if we continue our downward spiral of agricultural education programs, how will our country be educated on how to produce food? If we are unable to produce our own food sufficiently, how will our country eat? I do not know much about how government works but it seems to be that this should be
something our government should care about. The government, whether on a state or national level, should do something to ensure that agricultural education not only continues to stay in our schools, but continues to grow.

The last recommendation I have is to set our goals more realistically and set goals in small steps. Going from 7200 programs to 10,000 within the next eight years is quite frankly, impossible. Perhaps we need to look at large companies and see how they made a large jump to success. The book “Good to Great” by Jim Collins outlines some of the Fortune 500 companies that made a leap from “good” to “great” and stayed there for a number of years (Osborne). Research shows that these companies got to where they are in a serious of small steps instead of one large push. Solving the agricultural educator shortage with the “10x15” approach may push too hard. There are too many goals that “10x15” wishes to accomplish. I realize that all eight of the goals listed are exceptional goals that can hopefully all be achieved someday, I think that we need to concentrate on fewer goals at a time to achieve.

As for my first recommendation, the only potential consequence I can see is that initially, recruiting teachers for agricultural education may take qualified employees away from industry employers who are in desperate need of quality, agricultural employees. However, recruiting these educators will bring new employees to the industry by increasing the number of students that are enrolled in an agricultural education program. Besides this, I see no other consequence in recruiting agricultural educators at different levels.

I do see consequences that could arise with getting the government involved. First of all, does the government really have money to help with this? After all, our national
debt is HOW much? Second, this could make other educational programs demand help from the government as well, starting a vicious cycle within the educational system. Third, many people already worry about how much control the government has over our school system and this would only add to that.

As for my last recommendation I can also see possible consequences with taking steps small at a time. I do not believe that Team Ag Ed thought they could actually achieve 10,000 teachers by 2015. I think they believed that if they set their goals high, that they would still get high results. If we take things in small steps, will we be setting our standards and goals too low? Also, if we take these small steps, will it be too late by the time we get to our goal?

Let me give you a rationale for why I recommended recruiting agricultural educators at FFA Conventions. Students that attend State and especially National FFA Conventions are considered the “best of the best” that FFA has to offer. These students are the ones that have excelled at leadership and what they do while in their agricultural education program. It makes sense to recruit those that not only have the experience of being in an agricultural education program, but those that possess the leadership and skills to lead future students. Also, recruiting at these Conventions is easy because you have hundreds to thousands of FFA members all in one place at once. I guess this could be called “mass recruiting.” Many employers in the industry, such as Monsanto already have heavy recruiting programs at these conventions anyway, especially in Indianapolis at the National Convention and I think that agricultural education should have just as strong a recruiting program as these employers.
As you can see, our country is still in dire need of agricultural educators to instruct our youth. The “10x15” plan is a necessary step in achieving our goal of more programs. While it is a very large, thought out plan, there are a few flaws it has. I gave recommendations for this such as make recruitment the highest priority at conventions, get the government involved, and reduce the goals to focus on. I believe that if we do these things that we could see an increase in the number of agricultural educators and agricultural education programs in our nation. After all, someone has to teach our country how to produce food because we all need to eat.
Bibliography
