

The Voices of Minority Students in an Agricultural Communications and Journalism Program: A Case Study

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Abstract

In 1998, the National Association of State University and Land Grant Colleges addressed the “access challenge” for minority students, stating nothing less than open opportunity and commitment would embrace the land grant history. Researchers have documented barriers and strategies for the recruitment and retention of minority students in agricultural education. The experiences minority students have in college are unique, and effective recruitment and retention strategies should only be developed after in-depth, explorative conversations with the students; therefore, the purpose of this study was to begin the dialogue with minority students in agricultural communications. Nine students, eight female and one male were interviewed for this qualitative case study. This research was framed by the following questions: (1) Who are minority students within the predominantly White agricultural communications and journalism program at a southern university, (2) What are the experiences of minority students within the predominantly White agricultural communications and journalism program at a southern university, and (3) What are the perceptions of minority students of the predominantly white agricultural communications and journalism program at a southern university.

Introduction

The National Association of State University and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC) addressed what they called the “access challenge” in their 1998 report on the future of land-grant universities. “Land-grant institutions were created to open opportunity and broaden access for higher education. Today, this historical commitment must encompass the different educational needs of many different kinds of students coming from different and ever-more diverse backgrounds. Anything short of that is not true access in terms of our institutions’ history” (Kellogg Commission, 1998, p. 19). Land grant institutions are now experiencing the future predicted by NASULGC. According to U.S. Census Bureau data from 2000, approximately 30% of the U.S. population is a racial or ethnic minority group (Talbert & Edwin, 2007) and 28.7% of traditional college-aged students are African American or Hispanic (Opp, 2001).

Agricultural programs seem to be embracing the idea of access; however, a thorough review of available literature found no research on the recruitment and retention of minority students in agricultural communications programs. Agricultural education researchers have been conducting research in their discipline, one that can be considered “peer” to agricultural communications and in many land grant institutions is housed in the same department.

One of the key priority areas in the *Strategic Plan for Agricultural Education* claims “Attracting, serving, and retaining historically underrepresented populations will be an important growth strat-

egy for all of agricultural education” (Loudenslager, 2006, p. 5). Agricultural education researchers have documented barriers to minority students entering the field; these barriers have been operationally defined within education research as attitudinal barriers and structural barriers (Opp, 2001).

Attitudinal barriers include minority students’ negative perceptions of agriculture and agricultural programs (Bowen, 1993; Bowen, Bowen, & Heinsohn, 1997; Myers, Breja, & Dyer, 2004; Sutphin & Newsom-Stewart, 1995; Talbert & Larke, 1995; Talbert, Larke, & Jones, 1999), misperceptions of career paths and/or availability (Bowen et al.; Sutphin & Newsom-Stewart), and a view that the profession is made up of, and for, White men (Bowen et al.; Sutphin & Newsom-Stewart).

According to Opp (2001), structural barriers may include lack of financial aid, low number of minority mentors on campus and little minority culture and/or support services; the same areas where agricultural education researchers have focused their recruitment and retention strategies. Westbrook and Alston (2007) stated that “African American students who are surrounded by African American professors are more likely to remain in the agricultural field because they have role models or mentors” (p. 124). This trend is not limited to African American students; a minority student who has a role model who a) shares their culture and/or ethnicity and b) encourages them is more likely to succeed (Bowen, 1993; Jones & Larke, 2001; Talbert et al., 1999; Westbrook & Alston).

Talbert et al. (1999) recommend Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences (MANRRS) as an organization where students can interact and network to share experiences. “As a result of the existence of MANRRS and the networking and mentoring it provides, the participation and success of underrepresented students in agriculture and related fields have been enhanced” (Talbert et al., p. 95). Agricultural education researchers have stated that peers can influence one’s attitudes about careers and recommend workshops or seminars during elementary and secondary education to introduce minority students to agriculture and agricultural programs (Bowen et al., 1997; Talbert & Larke, 1995).

Although these recruitment and retention strategies are encouraging, agricultural education researchers have suggested effective recruitment and retention strategies can only be developed after speaking to minority students to discover what factors affect their decision-making process (Jones & Larke, 2001; Sutphin & Newsom-Stewart, 1995; Wildman & Torres, 2001).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Most agricultural education and agricultural communications programs are housed within colleges of agriculture located at land-grant institutions. Of the 107 land grant institutions, 50 can be categorized as Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). By utilizing PWI research as a conceptual framework and minority student development as a theoretical framework, minority students’ experiences at both the institutional and individual level can be better understood.

Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)

When legally mandated to open their doors, PWIs admitted cultural outsiders with relatively little thought given or action taken to accommodate the “stranger”... The unchanging nature of most PWIs conveyed to some that white institutions were superior and students attempting to maneuver through them must conform to the institutional standards rather than evolving standards more appropriate for the needs of a diversifying student body (Benton, 2001, p. 22).

Researchers have documented that minorities at PWIs face a plethora of emotions including hostility, isolation, and difficulty balancing between two or more cultures, and barriers including

self-segregation, a one-sided curriculum, and lack of minority faculty or mentors (Benton, 2001; Currence, 2007; Hernandez, 2002; Humphreys, 1998; Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002; Taylor & Olswang, 1997; Westbrook & Alston, 2007). According to Jones et al. (2002), the minority student experience is “distinctly different from that of majority students at PWIs” (p. 23).

The culture at PWIs can be isolating for minority students, whether through overt racism or more subtle prejudice (Currence, 2007). Because some minority cultures are based on strong family ties, minority students at PWIs may feel caught between conforming to the dominant culture on campus and staying true to their own (i.e. returning home regularly) (Currence; Hernandez, 2002). Either of these two factors on their own, or in combination, may lead to a third factor for minority students at PWIs: Self-segregation. This “seeking out” of other students who share their color, culture, background, or story is a coping mechanism for minority students (Benton, 2001; Hernandez).

Several ways exist to alleviate this sense of isolation for minority students at PWIs. One way is for students to create positive relationships with minority faculty or staff members because “personal, concerned contact appears to have a mitigating influence on the inherent isolation experienced by [minority] students” (Taylor & Olswang, 1997, p. 16). Closely related is creating places or organizations for minority students to go where they can feel welcomed at PWIs (Jones et al., 2002; Taylor & Olswang). Because PWIs reflect the dominant culture, minority students may not see themselves, their history, or their culture in the curriculum (Benton, 2001; Taylor & Olswang). Faculty members should examine their courses to ensure they are being inclusive in both their curriculum and teaching styles. “Research shows that when students perceive that there is a broad campus commitment to diversity, there is increased recruitment and retention of students from underrepresented groups and an increase in all students’ satisfaction and commitments to improving racial understanding” (Humphreys, 1998, p. 2).

Minority student development theory

College is a critical time for students as they answer the questions “who am I” and “who am I not” (Torres et al., 2003). These questions are at the heart of student identity development. A basic definition of student development provided by Rodgers, a key researcher in student identity development, is “the ways that a student grows, progresses, or increases his or her developmental capabilities as a result of enrollment in an institution of higher education” (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DeBrito, 1998, p. 4).

Student identity development theorists from Erikson to present, however, have called attention to the role the environment can play in a student’s development (Torres et al., 2003). “The first aspect that should be understood about campus culture is that ‘dominant campus features reflect the influence of the dominant groups’... This component of campus culture can influence how the racial, ethnic, or multiple identities of students develop” (Torres et al., p. 80).

Student identity development must also be understood as a very individualized, personal journey; no two people will experience it the same way. “A college student’s identity development is a complex and individual process based on choices that bring congruence between old and new learned beliefs” (Torres et al., 2003, p. 7).

Researchers have developed several models to look at minority student identity development, but they call them road maps or guides because the student’s development can be affected by their personal and environmental experiences. Each model has a number of stages along a continuum, although the model may not necessarily be linear in nature (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1993; Hardiman & Jackson, 1992). While there are models for specific races and all races are unique, the researchers

chose a model for all minority students because “the fact they have been subjected to various forms of physical, economic, and social discrimination suggests they share a common experience” (Atkinson et al., p. 27).

The Minority Identity Development (MID) Model developed by Atkinson et al. (1993) includes five stages—conformity, dissonance, resistance and immersion, introspection, and awareness (Atkinson et al., 1993; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003). In the first stage, conformity, minority students prefer the dominant culture over their own and may try to assimilate. Stage two, dissonance, occurs when minority students begin to question the beliefs from stage one; this can be a gradual process or a sudden occurrence (Atkinson et al.; Torres et al.). In stage three, resistance and immersion, the minority student completely accepts his/her own culture and rejects the dominant culture. Stage four, introspection, is a more personal stage. Minority students move away from the group views to which they ascribed in stage three and begin to develop their own personal identity (Atkinson et al.; Torres et al.). In stage five, awareness, minority students complete their self-introspection and accept or reject views from all cultures based on their own views and experiences.

By combining knowledge of the MID Model and PWI research, faculty and staff in agricultural communications programs will be better prepared to understand the experiences of their minority students, both at the individual and environmental level. Furthermore, this knowledge can, and should, be used to develop appropriate strategies for connecting to, interacting with and helping minority students.

Purpose

There is a lack of research on the recruitment and retention of minority students in agricultural communications programs. However, because the experiences minority students have in college (especially PWIs) are unique, effective recruitment and retention strategies should only be developed after in-depth, explorative conversations with students. The purpose of this study was to begin that dialogue with minority students enrolled in a predominantly White agricultural communications program at a PWI land grant located in the southern United States. This study was guided by three research questions:

- RQ1:** How do minority students within the predominantly White agricultural communications and journalism program at a southern, PWI, land grant describe themselves?
- RQ2:** What are the experiences of minority students within the predominantly White agricultural communications and journalism program at a southern, PWI, land grant?
- RQ3:** What are the perceptions of minority students of the predominantly White agricultural communications and journalism program at a southern, PWI, land grant?

Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study methodology. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) defined qualitative research as “...an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to them” (p. 3). Although different than quantitative research, qualitative research is similarly characterized by methodological acts that are

expected across the profession. These include an inductive research strategy, an emergent research design, small sample size, time in the natural setting, understanding the meaning people have constructed, understanding a phenomenon from the participants' perspective, and the researcher(s) as the primary data instrument (Dooley, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba further describe the research paradigm as including value-bound inquiry, an interactive relationship between the inquirer and the subject, and "time-and-context bound working hypothesis" (p. 37).

For this study, the researchers used a purposive sampling technique, a convenience sample. A list of the minority students enrolled in the agricultural communications and journalism program at this southern, PWI, land grant was obtained from one of the agricultural communications and journalism advisers. These 16 students were sent an initial contact email asking them to participate in a one-hour interview. Nine of the students agreed to, and kept, appointments for interviews during the data collection period of November 3 - December 3, 2008. Interviewees were assigned a code to protect their identity. The code was based on their major, their gender, and the order in which they were interviewed (for example, ACF1: agricultural communications and journalism, female, and the first to be interviewed).

Each interview transcript was typed, analyzed for individual units, and then imported into a computer program to print the units onto note cards. The researcher used the constant comparative method for data analysis. This four-step process begins with comparing the units to each other as categories emerge, solidifying the categories and their properties, reducing the number of categories while unit saturation occurs, and then writing the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Dooley (2007), "data analysis throughout the process allows the researcher to 'test' working hypotheses that emerge from the initial patterns for the next wave of data collection" (p. 37).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that qualitative researchers must establish trustworthiness just as quantitative researchers must establish rigor. Four criteria exist to establish trustworthiness—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was addressed in the study by peer debriefing, "a process [that] helps keep the inquirer 'honest,' exposing him or her to searching questions by an experienced protagonist doing his or her best to play the devil's advocate" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). Because naturalistic inquiry is time- and context-bound, transferability is achieved through thick, or detailed, description. Dependability and confirmability were both addressed in this study by establishing an audit trail and keeping a reflexive journal. The researchers would also like to acknowledge that their positionality (race, gender, class, etc.) affects the way they construct knowledge, view research and interact with students. Two of the researchers, a white female and a black male, teach and research diversity issues in agricultural leadership, education and communications. Two of the researchers, one white female and one black male, are professors within the department, one of whom teaches within the agricultural communications and journalism program.

Results

At the time of this study, the nine students ranged in age from 20 to 24 years old, and classified from sophomores to seniors in school. There was one male and eight female students interviewed. Interviews, scheduled at the students' convenience, were conducted in on-campus locations related to the major with which the students were already familiar.

The students

The students all chose to define themselves in terms of their family. ACF3, for example, said that she has a twin who lives with her in the dorm on campus, while ACF4 said: "I'm from a family

of four, one little sister and a dog (five with the doggie), we're upper middle class." Several students gave self-definitions in addition to their family descriptions. "I'm an outgoing person, love to talk, very curious, understanding, intelligent," ACF6 said. ACF5 described herself in terms of religion: "Pentecostal is what I am, you see it in my dress, hopefully you see it in my personality, it's a one God, Christian religion." Only two students described themselves in terms of race or ethnicity, and one, ACF7 said she was "Americanized Hispanic."

Their families

The students described their families in detail, who they are and what they do. Most of their parents hold what would be considered white collar jobs, placing the students in theoretically middle-to-upper middle class situations. ACF3 said her father is an executive chef at a restaurant who "wants to open his own when contract [sic] is up in two years." Both of ACF8's parents are engineers for a large electronics development company, where ACF6's father works as a manager. ACF4's mother works in the governmental relations department of a research hospital while ACF2's mother is a nurse at a teaching hospital. In contrast, two of the students had much different stories to tell about their families. "Mom is in welfare and housing program, school helped me out with school [college] application fees," ACF1 said. ACF5 said her mother was a nomad while she was growing up. "We never had a house or apartment to call ours, always lived with relatives. It sucked, no home, no stability, always keep your bags packed, you never know where you're going to go," she said.

Schools

When schools, both secondary and postsecondary, came up in the interviews, a mix of viewpoints was shared by the students. Two students said they went to public high schools, specifically stating that they were diverse. "High school was very diverse, someone from every type of background, because of magnet [sic] drew from across the district," ACM9 said. In contrast, two students who said they went to private high schools did not mention the racial make-up of their schools. Four of the students said they are first-generation college students, and for some, they are the first in their family to ever attend college. "First one to actually go to school, to do something beyond high school... my sister is currently applying to schools in Texas and Georgia," ACM9 said. ACF1 said she did not even know that something existed after high school, what college was. "I just went day by day, started asking questions in high school because I had friends who were planning to go to college, my counselor started telling me, 'oh yes, after high school you go to college'." In contrast, ACF4 said: "I always assumed I would go to college, always instilled in me throughout growing up, my Dad has always said 'I want better for y'all than I had'."

Choosing Agricultural Communications and Journalism

The students' reasons for choosing agricultural communications and journalism as a major fell into two categories. The first group wanted to do something communications related, and this is where they ended up. "Originally started out journalism, they took it off and I didn't know what to do because I was like 'I don't want to study anything else this university offers,' and because I was in the Corps I decided to stay in," ACF1 said. Another student, ACF3, echoed this sentiment when she said "...since A&M doesn't have a regular journalism program I thought I try the agriculture part of it and see how that goes." The second group of students said they chose this major after being kicked out of their first major, or the university, due to poor academic performance. "Honestly the

truth was that I got put on probation while I was in English, I didn't meet the probation so they basically dismissed me, so my only choice was to pick a major that would accept my GPR as-is or drop out of [school]," ACF2 said. ACF4 also transferred to agricultural communications and journalism from English: "The only reason I became an ag major, I was an English major but partied too much freshman year and I, um, had lower than a 2.0 and I had to look for another major to transfer to or I was going to get kicked out of the university." Although ACF6 did not mention her major, she had a similar story. "Considering the fact that I failed one of my classes which made my GPA drop, so I had to get into ag or get out of school, and mom wasn't having that," she said.

Because none of the students were original to agricultural communications and journalism they were asked how they had discovered the major. Most said that an adviser or a friend had told them about it. Interestingly, they were all told to speak to a specific agricultural communications and journalism professor. Their initial meeting with that professor made a lasting impression on many of the students. "First meeting with [the professor] was great...we talked past 5:30...I was surprised she didn't try to dismiss me...I felt so welcomed in that first meeting with her that I was glad that I got kicked out of the English department," ACF2 said. ACF7 said that while the people in the business department had seemed cold and uncaring to her, [the professor] was welcoming which made her excited about joining the major. "Talking to her made me feel at home, and that's why I decided to join the major," she said. Another student, ACF5, said: "When I first met [the professor] it was like Paula Dean, she made me feel really comfortable and made everything look really pretty."

The students were then asked if they could change anything about the major, what they would do. Several students said they would focus on getting the word out about the program, telling more people, and bringing more people in. "I would pour more money into the program, everybody would know about ag comm...I don't feel like we get enough attention, I don't feel like we get enough respect," ACF5 said. In a similar train of thought, ACF7 said: "We should advertise ourselves better to students because if my advisor had never told me to call [the professor] I would never had known about this [major]." ACM9, ACF3, and ACF6 suggested recruiting more minority students to the program.

Recruiting more minority students and making sure our major is known to everyone: "I feel like we recruit FFA students and more students towards agriculture and because that's what they've been around their whole life, I didn't know about agriculture until I got here," ACM9 said.

Faculty and Staff

The students' feelings of comfort and welcome extended to the other faculty and staff members in the program as well. "They want you to do well so they'll help you out any way they can, whether it's helping you out after class, even helping you out with simple things," ACF7 said. ACF2 shared similar thoughts, saying "It's more of a personal relationship, they try to help you...they don't try to brush you off like they did in the English department...here they treat you like an individual." Many of the students attributed this feeling of acceptance and familiarity to the fact that the program is so small; everyone knows each other and is on an individual level. "I feel very at home and very at ease, especially because we are such a small major, it makes me feel very connected to everyone...even as T.A.'s come in I'm able to connect with them," ACF4 said. Two students said they did not feel like they were part of the major yet, but said it was because they were still learning—either about the subject or about the department. "I feel like I'm in the freshman shoes getting into the major, getting into the classes and stuff, just dipping into it, trying to figure out what this whole department's about," ACF8 said.

Fellow Students

There were mixed reactions when the students were asked to describe their friends within agricultural communications. “The reason that I like ag journalism is because everyone knows each other, unlike other departments where there’s like 5-600 kids in the major, there’s only a handful of us so we get to know each other,” ACF7 said. ACF2 shared similar thoughts saying: “They’re great, it’s not a big major so you have the same people in every class for the most part, we’re all in the same classes.” However, some said their friends are outside the department and these are the people they go to class with. ACF6 said: “To be honest I don’t have any friends in this department, I have associates I guess you could say, and I don’t even know their names, I just talk to them in class.” ACF8 said: “I haven’t really talked to them outside of class, but for the most part I would consider them acquaintances.”

While discussing the other students in the major, ACF5 and ACF3 expressed concern that the students were different than them. “I don’t think anyone would be interested in the same things I am that are in my major...I don’t think we would have much in common,” ACF3 said. ACF5 said: “I am extremely intimidated of everyone that is in this major, I feel like they have the upper hand, like they have an advantage.” The students also discussed their friends outside the major. While ACF7 talked about a friend from a summer internship, ACF5 and ACF3 mentioned friends from home. ACF1 said her friends are outside of her school activities, fellow minority students whom she mentors.

Classroom and Program Experience

The students were asked to imagine themselves sitting at a desk in one of their typical agricultural communications and journalism classrooms. Once they had that image in their minds, they then were asked to look around them and describe who or what they were seeing. ACF4 for example said: “I see a lot of familiar faces, pretty much...” Similarly, ACF7 said: “I see most of the people I know as friends...we’re in the computer lab.” ACF1 said she saw students from both agricultural communications and journalism students and those from other majors taking the class to improve their writing. Two students focused on the female-male ratio within the classroom. “Probably like 20 females and like five males, most of them are like upperclassmen who are really excited about graduating and moving on,” ACM9 said. ACF8 said: “A lot of girls, there are some guys in there, they might be ag comm majors but I’m not sure, I can’t tell with the guys.”

Five of the students saw race or ethnicity when they looked around them in this scenario. ACF2 said “I notice the majority of our students are White, there are not a lot of African American students in our major.” In addition to noticing the majority of women in her classroom, ACF8 also noticed the racial makeup. “There’s probably a good majority in the class are Caucasian [sic],” she said. ACF5 also noticed race and gender, saying: “I see Farmer Joe’s daughter, I see the all-American White girl, blonde or brown hair, country accent.” Two students, ACF6 and ACF3, described how sitting in a classroom surrounded by a majority of people not of their race made them feel. ACF3 said:

“I mainly see mostly White students, mainly girls, and there’s two Black students in one class... like I’m the person that sticks out because I’m one of three Black students in the class... everyone else is White, which may be why I don’t know a lot of people in my major, I feel like I stick out a little bit because of that.”

This feeling of not being able to connect was echoed by ACF6. “All white, one Black sitting next to me...sitting in an all White classroom is different because you feel like there’s no one who can relate to you because honestly you can’t relate to them,” she said.

In comparison, some of the students said they just do not see race. When this description was probed, the students provided varying answers. ACF1 said “I know I’m a minority, but when I’m there I don’t see a difference, everything just shuts down, I never feel like a minority.” ACM9 said that he does not see color in this situation, that “everyone is friendly...and no one says anything that is out of place.” ACF2 and ACF7 say they do not identify themselves as a minority.

I think growing up, my mom came from a predominantly White neighborhood and her parents wouldn’t let her speak Spanish and they taught her to be more Americanized, so growing up I never saw myself as ‘ACF7, the Mexican,’ I saw myself as ‘ACF7.’

Similarly ACF2 said: “I’ve never really thought about ‘wow, there’s only a handful of Mexicans,’ I guess since I’ve never really thought of myself as a minority, as we said in class, people see me as White.”

In comparison, the students all stated they have never experienced or observed any racially-related incident in the program and/or the department. When asked, they all replied “no” immediately.

Student Organizations

The researchers wanted to understand the reasons minority students would join an agricultural communications organization, Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT), and/or MANRRS. Except for one who had been an officer of the organization, the rest of the students had never heard of MANRRS. The one student who had joined, ACF1, said:

“The program offers a lot of opportunities for students that I never thought of...I met a lot of important people, as a minority student I never thought I could do those things...go to a conference, fly on an airplane...I never pictured those things.”

All of the students were familiar with ACT, and six of the nine were members. The students who had not joined ACT said their schedules were full; they either had conflicts with the meeting time or too much going on to add another organization. One student chose to join Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA), another student communications organization, rather than joining ACT. Those who have joined described multiple membership benefits including getting to know their fellow students and connections for future jobs. “I joined so I could get to know different people, a good opportunity to be known as well as to get to know people, pick up a little knowledge along the way,” ACF6 said.

Conclusion

College is a critical time in the development of students’ identities. Researchers have shown that environment, in the form of campus culture, can play a role in this development process (Torres et al., 2003). When minority students are in programs or at institutions that have barriers such as those documented in agricultural education or at PWIs, this can further influence how their identity does, or does not, develop. These barriers can include a lack of minority faculty or mentors, culture, organizations, and/or support services.

The first research question that guided this study was, “How do minority students within the predominantly White agricultural communications and journalism program at a southern, PWI, land grant describe themselves?” The students interviewed for this case study described themselves first in terms of their family. Going by their parents’ jobs, most of them can be classified as middle class, and four of them are first generation college students.

The second research question guiding this study was, “What are the experiences of minority students within the predominantly White agricultural communications and journalism program at a southern, PWI, land grant?” Many of the students interviewed simply do not see race, in themselves, in the classroom setting, or in the program. The five students who did see race described the classroom as predominantly White (and female). They feel like they do not fit in or cannot relate to the other students.

When asked about two different organizations, ACT and MANRRS, only one of the students (an active member) had ever heard of the minority organization and this organization had taken out a full-page advertisement on the back cover of the magazine produced by students in the agricultural communications and journalism program. Researchers studying minority students in both agricultural education and PWIs have stressed that minority students need places to go where they can feel welcomed, and Talbert et al. (1999) stated that MANRRS can enhance the success of minority students in agriculture.

The third research question that guided this study was, “What are the perceptions of minority students of the predominantly White agricultural communications and journalism program at a southern, PWI, land grant?” The students had positive feelings towards the program overall, especially for the faculty and staff. Most of them described how welcome one specific professor made them feel during their initial meeting. They also said that every faculty member is open and caring, developing one-on-one relationships with the students, which means a lot to them. Although they said they knew a lot of their classmates because the program is small and they take classes together, many of them are more on the level of acquaintances than friends with others within the program.

The minority students interviewed seem to feel deeply and personally connected with the faculty within the agricultural communications and journalism program at this southern, PWI, land grant. Although research in minority retention and recruitment has shown minority role models tend to have a positive effect, Wildman and Torres (2001) stated “the friendliness of a departmental faculty and the overall friendly atmosphere in the College of Agriculture lead to selecting a career in agriculture” (p. 54). Many of the students interviewed transferred into the program after attending this southern, PWI, land grant for one or more years and credit the faculty as one of the reasons for choosing the program.

The students expressed conflicting views of minority identity. Some said they do not *see* race while one said she can “pass for White.” These students seem to be at stage one of the MID, conformity; they prefer the dominant group while they devalue their own individual and/or group identity. In contrast, several students described feeling different from their classmates or isolated within the classroom because of the color of their skin. These students seem to be at stage two of the MID, dissonance; these students are beginning to feel a conflict between the dominant group and their own individual and/or group identity.

Several of the students said their friends were either outside the agricultural communications and journalism program or “back home,” suggesting that these students are self-segregating or balancing two cultures as described in the PWI literature. Additionally, the minority students themselves stated that a future focus for the program should be bringing in more minority students. This combination of attitudes suggests some of the minority students within the program may be in stage three of the MID, resistance and immersion; they are accepting all minority group views, rejecting all dominant group views and seeking to eliminate oppression.

Based on the knowledge gained from applying PWI research and minority student development theory to the minority students' responses, the researchers have several recommendations for faculty in this agricultural communications and journalism program to further develop their roles as mentors for both minority and nonminority students. The faculty should model inclusion behaviors for nonminority agricultural communications and journalism students to learn. Second, they should ensure channels of communication are open so minority students can present any concerns they may have. Finally, faculty should strive to be more aware of the vulnerable environment that minority students feel the agricultural communications and journalism classroom presents. By focusing on these recommendations, faculty will be able to strike a balance between minority student identity development and recruitment and retention within their program.

The National Research Agenda has emphasized the need to “develop effective agricultural workforces for a knowledge-based society” (IFAS, 2007, p. 11) and “provide insights to strengthen courses, curricula and other aspects of academic programs in agricultural communications, agricultural journalism, development communications, life sciences communications, and related professional areas of interest” (p. 11). This study began the conversation with minority students in agricultural communications. Because it is a case study, the results are not generalizable; however, the description provided may allow others to see similarities in their own agricultural communications program and conduct similar qualitative studies thereby continuing the conversation and furthering the knowledge base relating to minority students, retention and recruitment, student identity development, and agricultural communications.

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Keywords

Recruitment and retention, minority students, agricultural communications and journalism

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