

# The Voices of African American Agriculture Teachers in One Southern State Regarding the NFA/FFA Merger

Wash A. Jones<sup>1</sup>, Douglas D. LaVergne<sup>2</sup>, Curtis D. White<sup>3</sup>, Sr., and Alvin Larke, Jr.<sup>4</sup>

## Abstract

*Sustaining human capital in the agricultural industry is critical to the United States' ability to maintain preeminence in the global economy. This goal has become a greater challenge due to declining participation in agricultural academic programs, particularly at 1890 institutions. Although the anticipated outcome of the 1965 "merger" of the New Farmers of America (NFA) and the Future Farmers of America (FFA) was to achieve synergy in this effort, the outcome was counterproductive in terms of the participation by people of color. This qualitative study utilized interviews, guided by 7 questions, to examine 22 African American teachers' perceptions of the impact of the merger. Participants taught agriculture in public schools in one southern state and/or were members and/or advisors in the NFA. Participants perceived that the merger was a "takeover" that led to a critical absence of participation and leadership development among African American youths. Participants agreed that the merger had a drastic, negative impact on the number of African American agriculture teachers produced and the number of individuals in the pipeline for agriculture-related careers, thus, a negative impact on building the industry's human capital. Findings from this study should induce innovative strategies to overcome the shortage of African Americans pursuing agriculture-related careers.*

**Keywords:** New Farmers of America; Future Farmers of America; 1890 institutions; human capital; African American agriculture teachers; merger

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## Introduction

Agricultural education programs at 1890 land grant institutions have experienced declining student enrollments that have precipitated in the number of program closures and reduction of graduates. These closures and reduction of graduates have impacted the agricultural industry's ability

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<sup>1</sup> Wash A. Jones is an Associate Professor of Agriculture in the Department of Agriculture, Nutrition and Human Ecology at Prairie View A&M University, 306 Agriculture and Business Building, Prairie View, TX 77446. Email: wajones@pvamu.edu

<sup>2</sup> Douglas D. LaVergne is an Associate Professor of Agricultural Education in the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources at Texas A&M University-Commerce, PO Box 3011, Commerce, TX 75429. Email: doug.lavergne@tamuc.edu

<sup>3</sup> Curtis D. White, Sr. is a Retired Professor of Agricultural Education in the Department of Agricultural Sciences at Clemson University, Clemson, SC 29634. Email: cdwhite@clemson.edu

<sup>4</sup> Alvin Larke, Jr. is a Retired Professor of Agricultural Education in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications at Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843. Email: a.larke@yahoo.com

to sustain and enhance participation in agricultural careers by people of color, more specifically, African Americans (Talbert & Larke, 1992). The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recognized the existing and future shortage of human capital especially due to a rapidly growing retirement eligible workforce, exacerbated by an increase in competition for skilled employees, as well as by an increasingly technical environment (USDA, 2008). Maintaining sufficient and well-trained human capital is the lifeblood of any organization, and the renewal, replacement and sustaining of human capital are critical (Costantino et al., 2014). In the last few decades, the agricultural industry has experienced a shortage of this vital element needed to sustain the industry (Goecker et al., 2015). This trend continued in the period from 2015-2020, wherein the nation experienced slightly more than 57,900 annual job openings for new graduates, and some 35,400 qualified graduates available each year to fill only 61% of these positions (Goecker et al., 2015).

A history of students seeking careers in agriculture began early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with two agricultural student organizations that separately served to prepare young people for productive careers in agriculture. The New Farmers of America (NFA), organized in 1935, was a national organization for African American boys studying vocational agriculture in the public schools (Strickland, 1994). The Future Farmers of America (now named the National FFA Organization), organized in 1928, was a similar organization for White boys. Both organizations promoted agricultural leadership, character, thrift, scholarship, cooperation, and citizenship among their members in which many sought agricultural related careers (Strickland, 1994).

After the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and societal desegregation initiatives, the two organizations merged in 1965. The merger resulted in problems and opportunities for both organizations. However, the identity and related aspects of the NFA were absorbed predominately by the FFA in terms of its name, emblem, organization's charter, popular NFA awards and financial assets (Norris, 1993). In fact, many of the NFA identity and foundational aspects were lost and were not included as a part of the merger (Strickland, 1994). Thus, many among the African American community question if the uniting of the organizations was a takeover and not a merger. Although the two organizations were similar, evidence found a lack of African American participation and leadership in FFA existed after the merger (Wakefield & Talbert, 2003). Many former members of the NFA believe this lack of African American representation was significant in the reduction of African Americans participating in FFA (Wakefield, 2001). Evidence suggested the NFA completely disappeared, and former members and teachers faced the difficult challenge of learning the traditions of a new organization and competing with long-time FFA members for awards and leadership positions (Talbert & Larke, 1992).

Interestingly, at the time of the merger in 1965, approximately 52,000 members in the NFA became members of the FFA, comprising about 11% of the total FFA membership (Bender et al., 1979). However, in 2018, the National FFA Organization had a membership of almost 700,000, in which 68.7% were White, 13.6% were Hispanic, 4.2% were African Americans, 7.7% *Undisclosed* and 5.8% were listed as *Other* (National FFA Foundation, 2018). Although FFA membership has increased, the percentage of African Americans has decreased from 11% to 4.2%. Considering the current demographics of the FFA and agricultural education do not align with the ethnic demographics of many public schools and communities (Roberts et al., 2009), a primary objective of the FFA Organization is to enhance inclusion, diversity and equity (National FFA Organization, n.d.) in order to keep pace with the changing national demographics and to help sustain human capital in agricultural career fields.

With the U.S. population of people of color increasing, it is becoming more critical to prepare this population for effective participation and leadership in agriculture related careers to help sustain the United States' world preeminence in agriculture (Agriculture Fact Book, 1998; Mitchell, 1993). The availability of role models and mentors engaged in agriculture related fields is vital in terms of

promoting participation by people of color (Jones, 1999). Due to rapid demographic changes in the United States, “opportunities to maintain a pipeline of future agriculturalists will depend on the ability of secondary agricultural education programs to attract students from non-traditional backgrounds” (Esters & Bowen, 2004, p. 25).

The U.S. population continues to diversify (Frey, 2020), and today’s ethnic minority population soon will be the ethnic majority population. Research on changing demographics suggested that the expected new majority population must be educated and prepared to become leaders in their chosen career fields to ensure the economic viability and the overall survival of the United States and the world (Mitchell, 1993; USDA, 1998).

This research addresses Priority 3 and Priority 5, respectively, of the National Research Agenda established by the American Association for Agricultural Education: Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce That Addresses the Challenges of the 21st Century and Efficient and Effective Agricultural Education Programs (Roberts et al., 2016). A viable workforce is needed to address food security, which has been deemed one of the greatest societal challenges ahead in light of the ever-increasing world population, which is expected to be 9.7 billion by 2050 (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015).

Capturing the voices of African American educators who participated in NFA before the merger and FFA after the merger may provide deeper insights regarding how to increase participation of African American students in the FFA and ultimately increase African Americans pursuing agricultural related careers. Although many senior African Americans, who retired from agricultural related careers, were members of the NFA and FFA after the merger, little research has been done and scarce literature exists to capture their experiential and knowledge base about how to increase the number of African Americans in agricultural related careers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such a study is paramount and timely given the majority of these individuals are senior citizens and have retired. This study aimed to provide insights about the experiences of African American teachers and leaders about the merger, the role of 1890 institutions in producing African Americans seeking careers in agriculture, and, more importantly, what they can share to diversify the agricultural workforce today and in the future. The overall research question that guided the study was: What are the voices of African American educators saying regarding the NFA/FFA merger and its impact on students seeking agricultural related careers? More specifically, the following research questions guided the study:

1. How did the NFA impact their lives?
2. What were their feelings about the NFA/FFA merger?
3. How did the merger impact agricultural education programs in the future?

### **Framework**

The conceptual and theoretical framework for this study used LaVergne’s (2008) diversity inclusion program model and Bandura’s (1977) theory of social learning. According to LaVergne, a diversity inclusion model embodies teachers and programs that have positive perceptions of the benefits of diversity inclusion and have solutions to increase the participation of underrepresented groups within their programs. According to the theory, these programs acknowledge the barriers imposed by past negative perceptions from students and teachers within the program or from others external to the program such as friends, co-workers, or parents. The theory further states understanding the perceptions that have hampered diversity inclusion efforts is necessary to increase participation of underrepresented groups or exclude programs that do not embody principles of diversity inclusion. When examining the vestiges of the impact of the NFA/FFA merger through the lens of LaVergne’s (2008) model, we found

a pre-existing barrier that hampered the career choices and/or aspirations of African Americans in agricultural education.

Bandura (1977) stated, “All learning phenomena results from observing other people’s behavior and consequences of this behavior that enables learners to acquire large integrated patterns of knowledge” (p.12). The theory stated people learn through “continuous reciprocal interaction of personal and environmental determinants” (p.9). The theory noted new behaviors can be acquired by observing and imitating others. Further, these behaviors occur through expectations, observational learning and behavioral capabilities. In addition to the observation of behavior, new behavior also occurs through the observation of rewards and punishments, a process known as vicarious reinforcement. An application of Bandura’s theory can be viewed in an analysis of the dwindling number of African Americans in officer positions, receiving awards or becoming members of the FFA after the merger. Although the FFA has gained some increase in students of color and women representation, it still remains underrepresented with male and female African Americans (National FFA Foundation, 2018).

### **Methodology**

To address the three research questions, we conducted a qualitative study (Caudle, 2004) involving 22 African American educators in one southern state. Qualitative research allows researchers to gather in-depth information about a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). We wanted to know how African American educators from one southern state felt about the NFA/FFA merger. Before attempting this research, we received approval from the University Institutional Research Board.

### **Participants’ Selection**

Criteria for participant selection included being a member of the NFA and/or an NFA advisor and a graduate of a university agricultural education program. To maximize the number of potential participants, we utilized snowball sampling (Creswell, 2007) to identify other current or former agriculture teachers who might not have been identified by us. This process resulted in the identification of 61 potential participants. Of the 61 potential participants, 17 were deceased. Of the remaining 44 potential participants, we were able to contact 34 by phone. To this avail, 24 consented to participate in the study. Of the 24 who consented to participate, two were unable to fulfill the interviewing responsibilities due to health conditions. Therefore, the total number of participants in the study was 22. To help ensure anonymity, each of the 22 respondents was given a pseudonym (Thomas & Hodges, 2010). See Table 1. Based on the extent and depth of information received during the interviews, we believe information saturation was reached through the 22 subjects interviewed (Merriam, 2009).

### **Interview Protocol**

We developed a seven-item interview protocol guided by our knowledge of being an agricultural education teacher and/or having NFA experience. Follow-up questions were posed for additional information and clarification (Berg, 1998). The seven questions were peer-reviewed by experts familiar with qualitative research. As part of making the voices of the interviewed subjects heard, we asked Questions 5, 6 and 7 to help assess the interviewee’s opinions (voices) on their perceived connections between the merger and the status of Ag Ed programs at HBCU’s. The seven questions were:

1. What were your thoughts regarding the NFA/FFA transition?
2. Did you support or were you against the organizations’ merger at the time?
3. Given today’s status, what are your opinions regarding the merger?
4. What was the greatest NFA impact on your life?

5. What is your opinion about programs at HBCU's/southern state university being closed?
6. What are your opinions about re-establishing agricultural education programs at HBCUs?
7. How did the closure of the agriculture program at southern state university impact the number of African American agricultural science teachers?

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Semi-structured one-on-one or group interviews, which lasted one to two hours, were conducted and videotaped to collect data from the 22 participants. The group interviews consisted of at least two of us researchers and specific interviewees who were available for the scheduled interviews. Later, we transferred videos to DVDs (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Data were analyzed using an open and axial coding (Merriam, 2009). We, along with two student research apprentices, transcribed the DVDs using constant comparative analysis (Janesick, 1994) to reach consensus on themes and findings. We employed triangulation and member checking to improve the accuracy, credibility and validity of determined themes and findings in the research (Gall et al., 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Measures of trustworthiness were used to establish research rigor. Credibility was established through peer debriefing and member checks. Transferability was established through purposive sampling, participant descriptions and their context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **The Participants**

Table 1 shows all of the participants (N=22) were African American males with experiences as an NFA member and/or NFA advisor. In fact, 21 of the 22 participants were former NFA members, and 15 of the 22 participants were NFA advisors. All of the participants except one had taught high school agriculture. Their years of teaching experience ranged from 41 years to 6 months. Several served at the state level as a supervisor following the merger. At the time of the interview, 20 of the participants had retired.

**Table 1***Characteristics of the Study Participants*

Participant	NFA Member	NFA Advisor	Years Taught	Employment Status
Bruce	Yes	Yes	40	Retired
Curtis	Yes	Yes	26	Retired
Blake	Yes	No	15	Retired
Fred	Yes	No	34	Retired
Ivan	No	Yes	5	Retired
Ray	Yes	Yes	41	Retired
Jack	Yes	No	37	Retired
John	Yes	Yes	33	Retired
Billy	Yes	Yes	20	Retired
Chester	Yes	Yes	30	Retired
David	No	Yes	43	Retired
William	Yes	No	37	Retired
Raymond	Yes	No	22	Retired
Gerald	Yes	Yes	28	Retired
Jonah	Yes	No	23	USDA
Walter	Yes	Yes	0 <sup>a</sup>	Retired
Sam	Yes	Yes	38	Retired
Henry	Yes	Yes	40	Retired
Albert	Yes	Yes	6 months	Retired/Marine
Gilbert	Yes	Yes	34	Retired/Rehire
Darryl	Yes	Yes	33	Retired
Ernie	Yes	No	2	Retired

<sup>a</sup> Walter did not teach but was an agricultural administrator.

### The Themes

The overall theme generated from the data analysis was Losses. The specific themes were (a) job losses and teacher displacement, (b) student development losses, and (c) program closure losses.

#### Theme One: Job Losses and Teacher Displacement

The merger resulted in some African American vocational agriculture teachers being placed in lesser roles or teaching subjects other than agriculture, which led to some teachers leaving the agricultural teaching profession. These losses, according to participants, played a substantial role in the perceived declining impact of the FFA on African Americans.

Chester said, “Since integration, we got left out of everything. I used to have a shop full of tractors, and, after integration, they put [the African American high school] as the middle school.” Chester transitioned to the cooperative extension service after the merger because his teaching position was dissolved. William stated, “We lost a lot; lost some great opportunities. Should have kept the vision of NFA, and we would be better off. We lost our camp; lost employment.” He continued saying, “We lost so much – still impacted today and noted that there is evidence today with the decrease in the number of African American teachers; critical teacher decrease. Lost opportunities to train Black leadership.”

The participants talked about how many lost their jobs to White agriculture teachers since many schools could not have two agriculture teachers. Blake added the merger led to some African American teachers being demoted from vocational agriculture teacher to a lower teacher category. Others noted agriculture teachers had to transition into other non-teaching job positions. They became cooperative extension agents, camp directors, members of county councils and assistant principals.

### **Theme Two: Student Development Losses**

Participants agreed the NFA was highly successful in providing leadership skills and professional development opportunities for youths. However, after the merger, a drastic decrease occurred in the number of African Americans benefiting from these types of activities in FFA. Although participants agreed the idea of a merger was good, they perceived the legacy of the NFA suffered greatly as a result of the merger.

A loss of the NFA's identity occurred. Many of the study participants noted the NFA lost its organizational ownership and much of its leadership development programs. Chester captured this sentiment best in his statement, "We got left out of everything. I don't see the opportunity for students to learn much of anything." Yet, Ivan had mixed emotions about the merger, stating, "It was a good transition, but it was not necessarily an improvement over the NFA because the FFA didn't do some of the things that the NFA did." Darryl said he did not think African American males benefited a whole lot because of the lack of participation in FFA activities. Blake concurred by saying African American students today are not being taught needed skills in vocational professions, which further limits professional development opportunities.

In terms of leadership opportunities available to African American students after the merger, participants expressed a lack of opportunities. Bruce noted the current student officer team at that time, comprised of White students, elected the new student officer team, and African Americans typically were not elected as student officers. In terms of former NFA members receiving leadership development opportunities in the FFA, Walter said he did not believe the NFA received "a fair shake." "We did not get a fair share of leadership roles," he said. This lack of leadership development opportunities has had a far-reaching impact on African Americans' participation and leadership in the FFA, as well as leadership in other agriculture related careers.

### **Theme Three: Program Closures**

Participants perceived the closure of 1890 land grant agricultural education programs had a drastic and profound, negative impact on the number of African American agriculture teachers produced. Additionally, the closures reduced the number of individuals pursuing other agriculture related careers. Fred stated the continued shortage of African American teachers exists due to the closure of agricultural education programs at HBCU's. Blake echoed the same sentiments and added the merger was an effort to accommodate the political environment at the time, but the effort was not sincere. Chester emphatically said, "They killed us. We just haven't been buried yet. How many people you know who have finished ag since that time? Replacements for [African American] teachers are not there." Billy indicated he was angry about the closing of the agricultural education program at the state university because "we were the only ones who let ours slip away, but others [African American alumni from other HBCU's] fought for theirs."

Clarence said he thought the closure of the agricultural program was terrible, and whoever was in charge at the institution was misled. The former president of the state's 1890 land grant university who requested the agriculture program be closed later admitted it was a mistake to close the program.

Although the idea existed to implement a 2+2 program in the state, wherein individuals initially enroll in the 1890 land grant institution and transfer to the 1862 land grant institution to finish their agricultural education degree, the idea was not implemented effectively. Blake said he thought the idea of an articulation between the two land grant schools in the state was merely a “transition gesture” in that it was not intended to be a real articulation designed to draw students from the 1890 to the 1862 land grant school. Ray said, “I thought like a lot of people did – that it (a 2+2 program) would never work.”

### **Discussion**

As indicated by the participants, the merger led to a loss of job opportunities for African American agricultural education teachers. Although desegregation may have been a primary impetus for the merger, as acknowledged by Blake in stating that the merger accommodated the political environment at that time, the participants suggested that the impacts of desegregation and the merger are related and interconnected. The conclusion regarding job losses is supported further by Wakefield and Talbert’s (2000) and Wakefield’s (2001) findings that reported African American teachers, after the merger, were (a) given positions without specific roles or functions, and (b) African American teachers were assigned to supervise only African American programs. Furthermore, Wakefield reported that African Americans lost the opportunity to develop their leadership skills as officers after the merger. In a study examining the need for diversity in agricultural education, Bowen (1994) reported agricultural teachers prior to the 1960s served as strong community leaders; however, the teachers who replaced them did not perpetuate the same leadership responsibilities.

Theme Two focused on loss of student development opportunities or the lack thereof. The merger was perceived to be a takeover by the majority of the participants. This led to a critical absence of leadership development and competitive opportunities for African American youths. Participants in this study perceive African Americans do not enjoy the same level of opportunities for leadership (officer roles) and leadership development (student competitions) through the FFA that they had through the NFA.

Agricultural education programs at 1890 land grant institutions, prior to the merger, served a critical role by providing a continuous pipeline of individuals who became leaders in agriculture and education in general. Reis and Kahler (1997) found agriculture teachers and former agricultural education students are among the most influential in determining whether or not students enroll in agriculture programs at college. The participants agree that the absence of African American mentors/teachers, which the 1890 institutions provided, resulted in a decrease in African American students entering the pipeline for an agriculture profession. The following quote from the NFA Archives supports our findings regarding student development opportunities:

There is a sincere concern by many Negro leaders that the values Negro youth are now receiving will be seriously jeopardized during the transition period, and much needed educational opportunity lost at a crucial time. It is not expected by any, however, that a transition can be made without some losses as work is going on toward gains (NFA Guide, 1963).

In Theme Three, although some of the research subjects agreed that re-opening agricultural science programs at 1890 institutions was a good idea, no general consensus existed among the group regarding reopening programs. A concern about reestablishing agricultural education programs at targeted institutions is that resources (land, buildings, funds) previously available have been sold or transformed for non-agricultural purposes such as golf courses, apartment complexes or retail spaces. Some individuals often have said reestablishing the programs would not be cost effective. Reasons included the institution having diminishing resources which forces institutions to seek creative solutions.

Some of the participants indicated they believe the feasibility of such an initiative could be impractical, cost prohibitive and may not draw sufficient numbers of interested students since society no longer is considered to have primarily an agrarian focus. Bell et al. (1987) believed desegregation ended the infrastructure to sustain African Americans in agricultural education. African Americans were apprehensive of being merged out of rather than merged into roles of usefulness and effectiveness (Norris, 1993).

To increase the number of African Americans pursuing agricultural education careers today, Ivan suggested getting more African American teachers, especially males, in the secondary schools because students need to see their image. He added, getting more African Americans on local school boards could help too because the board is a powerful entity. This might, as Curtis suggested, educate more African Americans about the programs in agriculture. Blake, Clarence and Albert discussed concern regarding the lack of infrastructure to support reopening of agriculture programs at HBCU's. However, Billy, Gerald and Albert advocated for potential educational partnerships within the state between the 1862 land grant school, the 1890 land grant school and technical schools. Such a partnership would address the infrastructure issue and certify more African American teachers in agriculture to increase/maintain this population and/or to maintain agricultural programs in secondary schools. Additionally, many of the individuals believed much of the NFA culture was erased after the merger and the FFA should seek more to mirror some NFA activities at the national level such as direct mentoring of African Americans by African American role models, skill development and talent contests.

Due to the critical need for agriculture teachers in the state, participants said some of them, as well as other agriculture teachers, had returned to teaching after retirement to fill teaching vacancies and to prevent closure of certain agriculture programs in the state's public schools. The participants acknowledged that the lack of agriculture teachers, particularly teachers of color, continues to be a concern in the state as many of the current teachers retire from teaching. As of the 2019-2020 academic year, the state had only six African American agricultural teachers in its secondary schools (NAAE, 2019).

### **Recommendations**

Lack of diversity inclusion in agricultural education programs has been identified as a critical limiting element for the field (LaVergne et al., 2011). Using the lens of Lavergne's (2008) research and Bandura's (1977) social theory can serve as a guide to our recommendations. Lavergne noted diversity inclusion programs must embody teachers and programs that have positive perceptions of the benefits of diversity inclusion and have solutions to increase the participation of underrepresented groups within their programs. Bandura's theory provides a framework for questions about the social and cultural impact of the NFA on African Americans and how might the FFA mirror the NFA more to compensate for some of the losses experienced after the merger. Therefore, we propose five components that are necessary to increasing the number of students of color in agricultural related fields. We begin with secondary programs and continue to higher education programs in agriculture at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Secondly, we believe partnerships are instrumental in increasing diversity inclusion in agricultural education programs.

#### **Secondary Programs**

Considering the existing educational landscape that might not be ideal in terms of diversity inclusion, secondary agricultural education teachers should develop relationships and collaborative networks with families, school administrators, guidance counselors, and other stakeholders in order to

diversify their respective programs (Warren & Alston, 2007). Additionally, secondary schools should conduct programming among the general populace on agricultural literacy. Disseminating findings from this study to high school students could be beneficial in terms of raising awareness. Promoting a commitment to employ more African American teachers as role models in secondary programs would be a major step toward increasing the number of African Americans pursuing agricultural education careers. Establishment of effective partnerships among the state's 1862 institution, the 1890 land grant institution and other entities would be critical due to today's educational infrastructure.

### **Agricultural Programs at PWIs**

As previously mentioned, partnerships are vital and agricultural programs at PWIs should initiate and embrace partnering with HBCUs and other entities to impact African American's decisions more effectively to pursue agricultural education careers. This could be accomplished in the form of inter-institutional coursework, adjunct faculty or faculty exchange opportunities, grant programs, and research activities designed to attract and promote greater participation by African American faculty and students.

### **1890 Institutions**

Re-establishing 1890 programs is a recommendation based on insight from the study's participants; however, we, as well as the participants, as noted in the discussion section, acknowledge the potential challenges associated with this recommendation. Hence, administrators at 1890 land grant institutions that no longer have an agricultural education program should partner to involve key government leaders and stakeholders on advisory boards and/or to develop innovative plans to re-establish the program at their institutions. Participating in inter-institutional activities previously mentioned and hosting regional or statewide agricultural events, such as Leadership Development Events and Career Development Events, could promote institutional exposure and serve as a conduit to re-establishing an agricultural education program.

### **FFA Organization**

The FFA should examine its current programs and seek to conduct programs that mirror those conducted by the NFA, such as the talent contest and the quartet contest. Previous research provides evidence people of color would be more likely to participate in agricultural education programs if individuals from their respective ethnic or gender group hold positions of employment in instructional and supervisory roles (Jones & Bowen, 1998; Osborne, 1994; Williams, 1992). To promote inclusiveness, the FFA should utilize this research to identify effective strategies to increase the number of African American mentors and role models in its organization. We hope the FFA Organization's Agricultural Education for All roadmap will serve as an effective conduit and model to enhance inclusion, diversity and equity within the organization and within agriculture as a whole. One issue we note as important in terms of inclusion and equity is, in today's race-conscious climate, the FFA should seek to delineate more specifically the race of individuals in the category listed as Other.

### **Partnerships**

Partnerships involving industry, educational institutions, youth serving and professional organizations can be a key strategy for success (Bloor et al., 2007) and can lessen the impact of a lack of resources (faculty, funding, courses, laboratories, etc.) while benefiting all partners involved (Roberts et al., 2008). Considering the findings and conclusions of this study, we recommend the National FFA Organization work in the secondary and collegiate educational systems to revive *the NFA Spirit*, which provided a critical component of participation and success for African Americans.

Reviving the NFA Spirit could serve as a catalyst for increasing African Americans' effective participation in the FFA and supporting the United States' objective of maintaining world preeminence in agriculture.

Diversity has been a buzzword used in various arenas for many years; however, implementation of diversity often is limited to demographic foci in terms of seeking racial, ethnic, gender and cultural diversity (Thomas, 2016). In order to achieve greater depth of diversity and to move beyond traditional rhetoric, entities serious about diversity must consider promoting inclusion and implementing innovative initiatives to address multiple aspects of diversity – beyond the traditional idea of diversity. Pursuing diversity in such areas as educational approaches, funding strategies, partnerships, technology and human/natural resources can be highly beneficial.

### Conclusion

Having the voices of retired African Americans who have worked their entire careers in agriculturally related fields is important. Although they agree the NFA/FFA merger was a loss, they also shared how the field can increase the number of African Americans in agriculturally related fields. Their voices on this important issue are noteworthy, as many, even at the time of our research, have passed away. Yet, they leave a legacy that is important to all in the field of agriculture. In addition to teaching, some of these individuals, like Bruce, Henry, Albert and Ivan, became impactful community, state and national leaders. As teachers, these individuals impacted generations of youth who proceeded to various leadership roles in society and who impacted additional generations. Because of their impact and value to the educational system, some of these individuals, like Curtis and Gilbert were called back to teaching after retirement in order to maintain certain secondary agricultural programs. As Albert and Ivan suggested, they developed and maintained a critical personal bond and connection with African American students and filled voids that are missing in today's classrooms, such as the presence of vital male role models to youth growing up in female-led, single-parent homes.

Findings from this study should be incorporated in identifying innovative strategies to overcome the shortage of African Americans pursuing agriculture-related careers. One strategy could be formalized collaboration between the FFA and 1890 institutions to employ the services of retirees (former NFA members) who are interested in working with current professionals to revise the models used to attract students of color to agriculture career fields. Additionally, these individuals could help write the history of the NFA, which is a critical missing link in the history of the FFA. Additional qualitative research should be conducted on the impact of the NFA to identify other strategies, which could strengthen the FFA.

Recommendations for future research should include replicating this study with similar populations in other states to examine if differences exist among individuals in other locations or with other teaching/educational experiences. Including subjects representing diverse roles in addition to the roles of the subjects in this research (include former teachers, state advisers, state supervisors of agricultural education, current leaders in the FFA, etc.) could provide an additional perspective on this issue.

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