



Ethnic Diversity in Agriculture

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Introduction

The field of agriculture has a disproportionality amongst gender and ethnic diversity, this is due to a combination of factors including, and not limited to systemic racism & sexism, limited land access, lack of generational wealth, etc. It is important to address what impacts this will have on the agricultural industry and what solutions can be taken to address this issue. As agriculture continues to advance in growing technologically, commercially, and industrially, it is equally as important to ensure that the ethnic diversity gap does not widen further. For the scope of this paper, the term diversity is defined in regard to the incorporation of people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds and identities; rather than the more common usage of diversity in agriculture which is defined as the distinct genetics of crops and their production. Over time, collective interest and considerations of implementing more diversity within any professional field have progressed. Incorporating more ethnic diversity within the field of agriculture can provide benefits toward consumer relations, expand ideas in academia, and offset various existing barriers in the industry. Actively incorporating diversification in agriculture can occur in tandem with the existing initiatives the ag industry is utilizing. Nevertheless, one must also take into consideration the legitimacy of concerns an increased sample population of farmers creates such as scarcity of resources, urbanization of farming, and opposition when trying to change policies and legislation.

Lack of ethnic diversity

There is a lack of ethnic diversity within the field of agriculture. Additionally, there is significant evidence that the sector of agriculture has a severe lack of diversity in regard to ethnicity by comparison of producers. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) 2017 Census of Ag Highlights: Black Producers reports that 1.4% of all producers in agriculture identify as Black, while 98% of all producers identified as White. The disproportionate representation of Black farmers can be problematic because it is not reflective of the current overall Black population in the U.S., which is 13.6% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Critical to the thesis of this paper is understanding how and why these disparities have been erected, and what mechanisms contribute to the vast misrepresentation of agricultural demographics as well as how this may further impact the industry. The USDA recognizes this as an issue and attempts to help rectify the issue through the Farm Service Agency's loan initiative.




About the Author



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I am a native undergraduate student here in Columbia, MO. My passion is to both surround, work with, and aid in the overall health and well being of animals (as well as their relative owners). My goal is to go to vet school in order to become a full fledged veterinarian. Beyond my undergraduate studies as an Animal Science major here at Mizzou, I am also deeply passionate in incorporating psychology and advancing diversity within the veterinary medicine, animal science, and agricultural fields alike. This is in hopes to create a more inclusive and more representative future in regards to these fields.

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Through this initiative, it recognizes specific communities which the program identifies as, socially disadvantaged farmers (SDA) and ranchers (USDA, 2019). The term is inclusive of women and farmers of color including those who identify as Hispanic, African American, Native American, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islanders, and other ethnic groups. Per the initiative facts sheet report, “An SDA farmer or rancher is a group whose members have been subject to racial, ethnic, or gender prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual qualities” (USDA, 2019). This definition provides a detailed description of how the USDA recognizes certain ethnic groups that have faced disparities specific to the agricultural field. Hence, this further proves these disparities within agricultural systems have adversely affected certain demographics within the field of agriculture. These disparities further add to the socioeconomic challenges faced by the affected populations including relevant representation.

Impacts of lack of diversity


To understand the existence of the disproportionality of ethnicity and gender within agriculture, factor into consideration the ensuing negative impacts of not having more ethnic and gender representation. The U.S. population has steadily increased over time, thus causing an increase in the ethnic demographics leading to an increase in demand for cultural-specific agricultural products (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). A report from the USDA’s Economic Research Service (2022) reveals projections of an increase between the years 2020-2060 in the overall Hispanic population from approximately 19% to 29% (net 10%), African American population increasing 1%, and the Asian population from approximately 6% to 9% respectively. As the U.S. population becomes increasingly more culturally diverse, particularly brought upon by immigration and the existing U.S. population, this may lead to increasing demand for certain food product demand that may grow faster than others (Dong & Stewart, 2022). Specifically, this means that certain genres of agricultural products belonging to different cultural demographics such as that as Mexican, Chinese, and, soul food, will create an increased demand for the food products needed to cultivate ethnographic-centric products.

As a result, it is reasonable to infer that with growing and changing demands for certain food products following the demographic shifts within the U.S., the field of agriculture will in turn experience more stress on the system to supply these stated demands. This is significant because the lack of ethnic diversity will prove to be a disadvantage for the agricultural system. Because the current composition of the U.S. agricultural system is predominantly white, it is not reflective of the current and future demographic compositions and consumers (USDA, 2017). The permeating effects of the lacking representation in the agricultural industry causes a lack of profits, marketing, and inclusivity.

Policies and barriers

Subsequently, the impacts brought upon by these disproportionalities in the agricultural field can be utilized to examine how existing governmental policies and customs within the field continue to contribute to the barriers that prevent equal representation of ethnic minorities in agriculture. This is important because the referred-to policies prevent equal representation of all members of the U.S. population. One example of such policies includes Section 152(3) of the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. The section of the act disallowed union participation for agricultural and domestic workers, most of whom were African American (Perea, 2010). This legislation is still being applied to the agricultural industry to this day, and from this, this policy has been revealed to participate in exclusionary practices of agricultural and domestic workers. Since its creation, the impact of the legislation has contributed to the barriers for minorities in the agricultural field, more specifically African Americans.

Additionally, there is evidence that a variety of different factors have significantly limited producers of color from further succeeding within the industry. These factors that limit ethnic farmers today derive from the legacies of colonialism, national development, food policy, and globalism which caused immigration and migration of many farmers and migrant workers (Seda, 2020). The lasting effects of these policies, customs, and legislation created lasting socioeconomic, geographic, and generational inequalities (Seda, 2020). By understanding more deeply the differences in lived experiences between racialized groups of food producers, and appreciating their race- and citizenship-based



obstacles, these profiles can provide the framework for agriculture institutions to pinpoint and begin to dismantle racial disparities (Seda, 2020).

Contrasting Viewpoint

Notwithstanding a noteworthy argument as to the validity of diversification of the agriculture industry, one must take into consideration the legitimacy of concerns that an increased diversified sample population of farmers creates issues such as scarcity of resources, urbanization of farming, and opposition when trying to change policies and legislation. Each of these contrasting elements provides an argument as to why diversification in ag might not be holistically beneficial. It is important to consider the contrasting points of view because proper operation of the agricultural system requires consideration of the varying viewpoints of population members. Chief among these considerations is the scarcity of resources.


Water scarcity and distribution are agricultural and environmental concerns. Water in particular is significant because the physical, technological, and economic characteristics of water resources pose special problems to the establishment of water rights and market-based allocation of water (Rosegrant et al, 1995). Therefore a diversification in agriculture which leads to an increase in the population of farmers contributes to and in some instances causes water scarcity. Another example of a scarcity of resources can be found in global indigenous populations (United Nations, 2022). Diversifying agriculture would further exacerbate the inequitable distribution of water if more farmers from that demographic were integrated into the agricultural system.

On the surface, urban agriculture appears to be beneficial to the ethnic diversification of agriculture. A study by Schlesinger et al. (2015) shows, “The ability to formulate appropriate support policies and intervention strategies depends on the knowledge of the interactions between ethnicity and agriculture in an urban context.” However, little is known about the role ethnicity plays in greater metropolitan agricultural ecosystems (Schlesinger et al, 2015). Moreover, urban agriculture requires access to land and financial resources. This poses an issue for two reasons, the necessity of land in urban areas can add to the scarcity of resources, and two, the financial endowment necessary to purchase the land is limited or nonexistent due to existing and historical exclusionary policies, including the policy previously stated.

A final source of contention to the diversification of agriculture is opposition to the existing system of power and control. Remedying the inequitable distribution of ethnic agricultural representation will take more than superficial attempts to integrate a more diversified and inclusive system. Policies and legislative measures must be enacted especially where it concerns African Americans to appropriately remediate the racially motivated exclusionary policies of the past, which continues to affect ethnic minority participation in agriculture (Rothstein, 2017). Therefore, it stands to reason that dismantling the system erected to prohibit diversification will contrast greatly with those who currently benefit from the lack of inclusivity and hold existing positions of power, thus making it the largest point of contrast.

Recommendations

Improving overall ethnic and racial diversity within the U.S. agriculture industry is accomplishable by further intensifying culturally-responsive outreach and support programs in conjunction with existing programs with the same purpose. By doing so, this can aid in further increasing awareness of the disparities that limit these communities within the field as well as advocating for increased support for diversification, while simultaneously advocating for more consistent financial resources. One element that can further diversification is through improved recruitment strategies geared to better acclimate these communities within the field. It has been proven that outreach programs, such as agricultural workshops, seminars, and field trips geared to immerse multicultural students into agricultural systems can improve their overall sense of belonging within agricultural spaces (Drewery et al., 2023). Lastly, comes the most crucial factor in improving agricultural diversification, which is ensuring that the existing programs centered




in providing outreach for these communities are being intensified in order to further advance diversification. There are a variety of essential programs within the U.S. that are helping to bridge the ethnic gap within the field of agriculture.

Such programs include Kansas State University's Multicultural Academic Program Success (MAPS) geared toward giving new multicultural students a better understanding of agriculture system enrichment, as well as invoking interest in majoring in Agricultural degrees (Wiley and Hobbs, 2021). An additional program is The Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS), which is a multicultural collegiate organization whose mission is to supply underrepresented groups with support and connections within academic agriculture and natural resources (MANRRS, 2020). By enhancing the prevalence of these programs across the U.S., there can be significant growth not only to the general scope of the agricultural industry, but this may also be beneficial towards agricultural academia. It has been shown that an increase in collaboration of diverse science personnel (across gender, ethnicity, discipline, and affiliation) typically exhibit a greater positive impact on their research initiatives (AlShenli, et al., 2018). Conversely, increased diversity can also further advance the agricultural field technologically. This is why it is critical to supply further support and advocate for these programs because they can bring more inclusion of different people to agriculture that have previously been limited into entering the field.

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