

**Bridging the Ag Literacy Gap**

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## **Bridging the Gap: Gateway to Agriculture Professions**

### **Introduction**

As a result of declining enrollments, many colleges of agriculture are working to increase or revise recruitment efforts to more effectively attract students. Based on recent community college enrollment trends, a potential source of students to increase agricultural enrollments might be found at community colleges (Horn et al., 2002). However, anecdotally, the university has found that recruiting students for careers in agriculture to be a challenge. The majority of the regions large minority population views any work in the agriculture industry as tedious and low paying. Herein lies the motivation for the “Bridging the Gap: Gateway to Agriculture Professions” project. This project is intended to supplement efforts by the university to attract increased numbers of underrepresented students by tapping into our closet source of potential students, (Community College name). The inherent goal of this program is to help students to bridge that gap to the numerous career opportunities that exist for them in the agriculture industry.

### **How It Works**

Over the initial two year period of this project, the following steps were taken to accomplish the four objectives set forth by the project staff.

*Objective #1: Build bridges between agriculture and general disciplines taught at community college.* Steps taken by project staff: 1) train at least 20 community college faculty and ten high school counselors from feeder high schools in agriculture literacy concepts, 2) make at least five agriculture literacy presentations to classes at the community college, and 3) create an Interdisciplinary Ag Club at the community college to help promote agricultural careers.

*Objective #2: Bridge the gap between community college students and university agriculture programs.* Steps taken: project staff utilized the university’s Agriculture Ambassadors to build relations with the community college students. Ambassadors interacted with students through at least six activities each year, including visits to their campus, classroom presentations, and outreach activities provided at the university.

*Objective #3: Build a bridge between students and agriculture industry.* Steps taken: 1) staff developed a two-week summer program entitled the “Ag Summer Bridge”, 2) staff recruited and selected 20 students from the community college, 3) coordinators met each student and their parents to answer questions and get parent approval, 4) first week of the program consisted of field trips to numerous agricultural industry sites, presentations and panel discussions with industry people, USDA field and agency personnel, university students, faculty and administrators, and 5) during the second week, participants had the opportunity to shadow a professional working in the agriculture industry. Week two culminated with a stakeholder’s luncheon and presentations by participants reflecting on their experiences.

*Objective #4: Provide financial support to one student.* Step taken: project staff selected one past participant of the “Ag Summer Bridge” program to receive a \$15,000 scholarship.

## Results

There was a significant increase in project outcomes between the first two years of this project. In Year II, all goals and objectives were achieved. Nearly all listed activities were met. Only one, the development of an Ag Club fell below the minimum standard for achievement. All other program activities exceeded attendance and number in Year II. Participant satisfaction, as measured by surveys and exit interviews, was rated at nine out of a possible ten.

There was a measurable difference in positive outcomes between Year I and Year II of the program. Using several measures, a comparison of the two groups indicated a measurable difference in attitudes and behavior in the context of educational and career goals (See Table 1).

Three major themes emerged from the four surveys and the exit interviews. The major themes communicated by participants when discussing the impact of the “Ag Summer Bridge” program: 1) strong desire to make contacts and secure a job (98% of participants), 2) desire to complete a four year education at the university (90% of participants), and 3) desire to pursue a career in an agriculturally related industry (97% of participants).

Table 1. *Outcome comparison between Year I and Year II of Bridging the Gap*

	Year I (n = 13)	Year II (n = 20)
No. of students who transferred from community college to university	1	7
No. of students who choose a major or career in agriculture sciences	1	15
No. of students who made a commitment to serve as outreach rep.	5	20
No. of students who felt that the program had a positive impact	2	20

## Conclusions/Future Plans

The “Bridging the Gap” program met or exceeded expectations in all four stated objectives. Project Coordinators addressed the challenges from the first year of the program and made adjustments that resulted in a positive experience for students, industry leaders, staff, and family members. Given the positive results and notable impact the “Bridging the Gap” project has had in its first two years, the project coordinators are exploring possible ways of continuing this program beyond its third and final year by seeking additional funding sources.

## Cost

This project was funded by a grant from the United Department of Agriculture’s Hispanic Serving Institutions Educational Grants program. The grant provided a total budget of \$328,000 for this project.

## References

Horn, L., K. Peter, and K. Rooney. 2002. Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Institutions: 1999-2000 (NCES 2002-168). U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.