

Great Opportunities in Urban Agriculture: Planning for Teaching in Non-Traditional Programs

By Kerry Martens

I attended a regional suburban agricultural education program in Connecticut during high school that changed my life. Prior to that enrollment, I had always liked to work with animals and thought that veterinary medicine would be my chosen career. My goals were limited to that single aspiration until I attended this program. I was not a traditional agriculture student and had no real agricultural experience to speak of at home. None of my extended family had an agrarian background and my experience was limited to the traditional, small family vegetable garden. I was a Boy Scout preparing for my Eagle rank and enjoyed the many things the outdoors offered me, so I decided to apply.

The high school agriculture program was highly selective and required several recommendations. Upon acceptance I was required to have an SAE project and decided to raise and show rabbits making it into a specialty animal production project. Although the project didn't qualify me to compete for any awards to a significant degree, the transferable skills I learned in building our portfolio-based SAE project and the discipline I acquired associated with the record keeping involved in tracking income, expenses, hours, and working within a budget provided me with experience I'll use throughout my career.

The Ag Ed department of my high school became my support area and I felt comfortable there surrounded by students who shared my interests and

teachers who recognized my potential. By my senior year I had become FFA president. I led a committee which sent school supplies and agricultural materials to a school in Narok, Kenya and in my first year of college I was awarded the national H.O. Sargent Award for promoting diversity. Over my four years of high school I saw my understanding of an agrarian life broaden.

My Ag Ed classmates and I left this program well prepared to either pursue an ag related career or other career pursuits because we had acquired job skills through hands on learning. We even left high school with solid resumes based on our SAE portfolios. My own career goal had changed. I had seen how my agriculture teachers and the program affected my life and my fellow students and I decided to become an agriculture teacher.

My own experience and personal growth is a testament to the fact that large, suburban agricultural education programs offer great opportunities. Therefore, this past fall I asked to complete my student teaching at an urban agricultural program. I felt I had a lot to offer my students. What I did not realize in September was that working in an urban setting would be a very special challenge.

What I quickly learned was that many of the students were not necessarily interested in agriculture nor were they contemplating careers in agriculture. A significant number had applied to this school because it was safer than the other major traditional city high schools they had to choose from and felt no particular pride in attending the agricultural education program. My

students came from a wide variety of inner city middle schools and in many cases were not prepared for the rigors of high school. This is reflected in their reading, writing and math skills. Walls needed to be scaled before these students could fully enjoy the benefits of agricultural education.

Urban students can have a very hard time relating to agriculture since it seems so foreign. Some of them live in very poor areas of the city where even a tiny vegetable garden is unheard of. Often indoor plants are a novelty; some students' homes may have a few window boxes filled with seasonal flowers. There is little grass to tend during the spring and summer months. I had students who did not know what a plant bulb was. Their images of an agrarian world are limited to books or TV.

The experiences of urban students can vary. I had students who had never left their city homes and, therefore, were simply amazed when taken to a park on the outskirts of the city to view the fall foliage. Since urban Ag teachers must seize every opportunity to further educate their students about the environment, this simple trip became an open classroom on how and why leaves change color in the fall. These how and why questions are the heart of agricultural science education. The actual onsite field trip based classes are critical in an urban setting since many of the critical concepts in an agricultural class are new to these students.

One of the teachers I worked with noted that a common question asked by her students was "is there science involved in agriculture?" This is be-

cause the students felt you just put a seed in soil, cover it over, and add water and it will grow. I worked with these students on a project-based class in which each student built an ecosystem out of soda bottles. One of the students noticed the white roots on the side of one of the bottles and thought they were worms asking why they didn't move.

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From a teaching perspective, this question offers a great opportunity because it was the first time this student ever planted a seed and actually saw it grow. A possible Agriscience Fair project in conjunction with the FFA portion of the agricultural class would encourage this student's natural curiosity into a CDE.

It is important to note the conditions students go back to after they leave school. If they are surrounded by concrete buildings and streets, where does agriculture come into their lives? The urban agricultural teacher needs to understand these students cannot necessarily relate to traditional "cows and plows" agriculture. For

instance, in a class on ecosystems I used an example of a crack in a sidewalk with a plant beginning to grow up from it. I asked the students if they had ever seen this and questioned them if this was part of an ecosystem.

Also, the urban ag teacher must recognize that parental support may be at a minimum since, for the most part, their parents do not fully understand the career opportunities in present day agriculture especially if they, too, are products of this environment. This is why educating your students and their parents, the community and the city school board about the possibilities for students in the field of agriculture is so important. They must understand how diverse the agricultural industry really is.

It is important for today's urban agricultural teacher to have knowledge regarding the various ag related businesses within the school's community and to network with these businesses so that the students see the various career opportunities available to them. Relationships with area businesses open doors to these students for possible job placement while in high school. They could eventually have a placement SAE that could teach life skills and possibly lead to a job after high school.

Some students may join the program since they want to grow plants or care for animals, but a well defined urban agricultural education program can provide these students with much more. The program must first broaden the students understanding of their own world and the role of agriculture in it. Students must realize when applying to an agricultural program that they are going to be learning skills they can use in the future. They need to realize they will have hands-on experience that will help them when they apply for jobs after high school.

Many of the students in the urban environment do not think about the

future at all. They may have performed poorly in Middle School and have low self esteem and little hope of doing better in high school. They may feel that all doors opened to other students are constantly closing for them. This is where the Ag teacher can draw upon these students' interests, correct their misconceptions, and begin a process to improve their self esteem and confidence through positive reinforcement. Many times urban ag students begin working odd jobs before they are employable, receiving very low wages "under the table" to assist in feeding their family.

When they turn 18 they know they will be on their own and do not necessarily see themselves making beyond minimum wage. Here is where we, as agricultural educators, can help these students be successful. We use hands-on teaching techniques in classes that can prove particularly beneficial to a student who has traditionally been a poor performer. If we pursue working relationships with people in local ag industries, we can place students in jobs that will give them skills that will benefit them in the future. There really are great opportunities in urban agriculture programs.



Kerry Marten is a senior in Agricultural Science Education at Cornell University

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