

Everyday People in Agriculture: Our Voices, Our Concerns, Our Issues

Author

Chastity Warren English, Ph.D.
North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University
ckwarren@ncat.edu

Type: Philosophical

Research Area: Teacher Education and SBAE

Everyday People in Agriculture: Our Voices, Our Concerns, Our Issues

Abstract

Dr. Chastity Warren English, Professor of Agriscience Education at North Carolina A&T State University, presented the 2023 Distinguished Lecture at the Southern Region Conference of the American Association for Agricultural Education in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Dr. Warren English's talk focused on the importance of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belong in agricultural education and allied sectors while also highlighting her lived experiences in the discipline. She also illuminated the concerns of her students in an 1890 Land-grant University context. This article is a philosophical work based on her distinguished lecture.

Introduction

All good teachers understand that when approaching sensitive topics, we come to the issue with care and truth. Therefore, I want to frame my talk today to ensure that my audience understands that we will discuss sensitive topics that may make us uncomfortable. I do not intend for my conversation to offend or isolate anyone. All are truly welcome here. However, as an educator, I want you to be aware that I will talk about fear, hate, the misunderstanding of others and stereotypes, and the lack of inclusion and representation of everyday people like me in agriculture. I want to ensure that we have a safe place to engage and that each of us is “authentic.” I want you to understand I come in peace before we begin this journey together.

George Washington Carver, one of the most outstanding agricultural scientists to live, is known by many for his outstanding scientific research contributions with peanuts and sweet potatoes, and the list continues. Dr. Carver once noted, “Fear of something is at the root of hate for others and hate within will eventually destroy the hater.” The inspiration for this lecture came while I was listening to Sly and the Family Stone's, *Everyday People*. The lyrics caught my attention: “I am no better, and neither are you. We are all the same no matter what we do. You love me, you hate me, you know me, and then you can't figure out the bag I'm in. I am everyday people.” If you have not heard this song, I encourage you to listen to it at least once. While listening to this song, the idea of sharing my voice and my students' voices with you came to mind because we all are everyday people in agriculture. There is no difference between you and us. We have the same interest and passion for agriculture as others in this field.

Purpose

My lesson today aims to offer possible solutions that have worked for me when working with individuals, particularly students who were different from me. In addition, this talk will allow you to get a glimpse into understanding how my current and former students view agriculture today. One of my goals has always been to increase the representation of individuals in the agricultural profession. This goal has required me to have difficult and honest conversations that have built relationships with my students needed for fundamental changes. Henry David Thoreau once said, “Things do not change; we change.” If Thoreau is correct, I humbly submit to you the challenge of becoming the “change you want to see in this world.”

Representation in Agricultural Spaces Matter

I have been in agricultural education ever since 1991. I am now 46 years old and still passionate about agriculture. I always assumed that the agricultural environment would increase its diverse representation to include more people like others and me over the years. Unfortunately, this has not been true for my students or peers. I remember attending my first FFA state conference, and the shock of the experience is one I can still recall vividly. If you ever want to know what that experience may feel like, I invite you to attend a National MANRRS conference one year. The diverse individuals who attend the MANRRS conference and the sense of belonging is one that many agricultural professionals look forward to each year.

During my first year at North Edgecombe High School, Mr. Morris G. Armstrong, my Agricultural Education teacher, introduced me to the world of agriculture and the FFA. Mr. Armstrong said, Chastity, if you can become comfortable with being Black and female in agriculture, you could study this major in college. Now keep in mind, as a young woman, I pondered that these are two aspects of my identity I can never deny.

I often asked Mr. Armstrong if the challenge was for (1) **me** to be comfortable with being Black American and female or if I had to (2) wait for **others** to become comfortable with me being Black American and female in Ag. Education? As a young girl, I assumed this challenge would change by the time I grew and worked in the industry. I always thought I would not have to provide my students with these same conversations years later. I must admit how wrong I was as I stand before you today.

Strategies that have Helped over the Years

I encourage you **first** not to **fear** anyone you have not made an honest effort to understand and get to know as a person and **second**, avoid the stereotypes you may assume about the person or their people. **Third**, communication is critical when your purpose is to connect with others. As an educator, I aim to build relationships with my students so they can be authentic. Providing students a safe place to be themselves also allows me to “Be,” because of this shared understanding, we often develop a relationship that works for both of us from these frank exchanges. We learn and teach each other by sharing our challenges, joys, and experiences; this understanding allows us to work cooperatively to meet common goals. The shared knowledge we both realize through these growth moments is, “We are more alike than different.”

My Challenges and Issues

As a mid-career professional, my challenges and issues are the (1) unrealistic demands of working at an 1890 land-grant institution and (2) my second challenge is to the increase of international faculty working at HBCUs who may not appreciate or understand the Black American experience and the lack of understanding these faculty members may have about the students they serve in the HBCU environment, and last, but not least is (3) work-life integration.

My Reality of Working at an HBCU

This spring semester, I coordinate the graduate and undergraduate programs. I am teaching four courses this semester, including the supervision of my student teachers. I am currently advising 40 students and serving on thesis committees. I have many service commitments, such as being my college's chair of the Research, Promotion, and Tenure committee this year. I have research expectations like all faculty, and we currently are planning how to obtain R1 status. I calculated my time and effort over 150%, and my position is a 100% teaching appointment. Due to the design of the revised rubric implemented three years ago, I have yet to receive "exceed" standards on my annual evaluation. When I consider all the areas, I am responsible for and the time I have to meet my obligations and lack of resources, I often feel my work needs to be acknowledged by my administrators.

Another challenge is the influx of international faculty at my university, who do not understand or care to understand the "Black American Experience." Sometimes my colleagues have their own biases against my students and me, which they often cannot hide, yet they seek employment in these HBCU spaces. Their views often mirror the American majority views of Black America until they make an honest effort to get to know the students and faculty independent of the stereotypes and biases, they may have had when they started working.

Finally, my last concern is work-life integration. My family is my top priority, and I want to ensure that I take care of them and myself as a wife, mother, daughter, sister, and aunt. My husband, Mr. English, my 13-year-old son Corey, who is brilliant and autistic, and my lovely daughter Charity are my reasons "why." I must ensure that I spend quality time with them and create memories while being active, present, and engaged in my profession.

Upon reflection, I acknowledged my concerns and challenges, but I was curious to know what other like-minded individuals were experiencing. Due to my close relationships with my students, I ask them what challenges or issues they currently face in the agricultural field. I wanted to see how their experiences differed from mine.

Everyday Students' Voices

Likewise, I was curious to know what my students were facing in the field as young professionals and current undergraduate and graduate students. I had 25 students provide me with their candid insight. I asked them to be honest, and they were blunt in their responses. First, let me give a few demographics to help you understand my students. Their ages range from 18-32; they are Black, Native American, Multiracial, Latino, and White. Their employment areas include career status agricultural education teachers, new teachers (1-3 years), and USDA employees. Some are farmers. They also work for policy groups in Washington, DC; some are in graduate school across the country, working in Cooperative Extension, Community Colleges, and in business and agribusiness, working in sales or research. They are male and female, and some self-identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Most were active in student organizations such as FFA, Collegiate Farm Bureau, or Minorities in Agriculture and Natural Resources (MANRRS). Their content areas include agribusiness, veterinary medicine, agricultural education, natural resources, soil science, and animal sciences.

To keep the survey simple, I asked them one question. - *As a professional in agriculture, what are your issues and concerns?* As students began to share my question with others, I was amazed at how many wanted to respond to my inquiry. Obviously, they have wanted to share their thoughts for some time. As I read their answers, I was amazed at how essentially they all were feeling the same and how I, too, have often felt like they did in these agricultural spaces. I began to ponder, "How can we all work in different agricultural industries in other states and regions of the country? Yet, when asked one question, their feedback was similar and triggered all the emotions I sometimes experienced myself over the years. I can identify with my students and their feelings of being in "white spaces" in agricultural settings, surrounded by others who may not care to know their story or understand their purpose.

Arundhati Roy stated, "There is no such thing as the 'voiceless.' There are only the deliberately silenced or the preferably unheard." Considering this perspective, I humbly present my students' voices- their challenges and concerns. My students stated the following: they are concerned about (a) sustainability, climate change, and the depletion of natural resources; (b) diversity, inclusion, and equity in agricultural spaces; (c) agricultural literacy and career awareness for current undergraduate students and younger students (K-12); and (d) coaching and mentoring in the workplace. I have included their actual responses below for more insight.

Sustainability, Climate Change, and Natural Resources

1. "Climate Change and the Adjustments needed to Growing Seasons and Plant Hardiness Zones."
2. "I want to highlight the importance of land acquisition."
3. "My concern is about sustainable agriculture. How can it be sustainable when any discovery of sustainable material results in the entire industry switching and that material, once sustainable, is no longer sustainable?"
4. "How do we increase the awareness of the food production system? How do we improve our current approach to reducing food waste and expand our current effectiveness?"
5. "The Colorado River and Clean water."
6. "Waste management, the increase of littering, GMOs, and Agricultural literacy is vital, and we should have more effort to address these topics!"
7. "Are we leaving mother Earth in a better condition than how we inherited the Earth? What will happen to the next generation if we do not do a better job of taking care of the land?"
8. "Everything."
9. "Lab-grown chicken, real chicken, is a concern for me. I do not trust the food sources; this concerns me, Doc."

Diversity, Inclusion, & Equity in Spaces

10. "We have agricultural education teachers who are white and racist, which prevent diverse youth from wanting to join in agriculture, and most have no earthly idea of what MANRRS is and that the organization exists."
11. "White Women. Okay, not all white women. However, especially white women who only look out and create space only for other white women. I am also trying not to continue the "systems of oppression" or be caught up in the "white gaze." I stand firm on Black issues in these spaces not made for me, which has historically excluded us." (*The white*

gaze is the assumption that the default reader or observer is coming from the perspective of someone who identifies as white or that people of color sometimes need to consider the white reader or observer's reaction.)

12. "In my opinion, I would say that the lack of Black representation in the agricultural industry is very apparent and understandable. It is not an exclusion problem nowadays. We are unaware of available agricultural jobs, and we need to explore these opportunities."
13. "One of my concerns as an educator is the teacher shortage. How do we keep teachers in education and provide funding for their programs; how do we diversify the teaching faculty in grades 6-12 to meet the population they serve?"
14. "An issue or concern in the agricultural industry is Diversity! Only a small number of people of color, male or female, are employed professionally or in human resources. From the industry, there is much uncertainty due to the current economic climate."
15. "Our advocacy groups need to be more effective. We have a bunch of cooks in the kitchen who need to learn what they are doing. We have Black folks who do not know what MANRRS is and the organization's purpose. It may be because sometimes we feel pushed out. There is a huge push for women's leadership in MANRRS, and it has sometimes become a place devoid of black masculinity."

Ag Literacy, Career Awareness

16. "We are geared to only a select number of jobs that we see others join from college, and we only apply for those jobs. However, over a hundred agricultural jobs will give you the same opportunity and even more opportunities than the positions we know about. For instance, in Animal Science, we only see and learn about Veterinary School and working at a poultry, swine, or beef processing plant. Nevertheless, there are many other avenues to take. Like in our sector, if it were not for the Aggies on the team opening the doors and creating the pipeline for others, nobody would ever know that route was possible. However, there is also an issue with Alumni not reaching back or going back to A&T and providing information and opportunities to upcoming graduates."
17. "Giving back to your Alma Mata only sometimes correlates to giving a monetary donation or sponsorship, but also providing other opportunities like jobs, workshops on business professionalism, or just being a mentor for the next generation. **I have always been the dot on the paper everywhere I go**, but it is not because of exclusion. It is more about us finding few of these jobs interesting due to a lack of knowledge of that industry or being comfortable with being uncomfortable."
18. "The agriculture profession needs to better expose younger generations to agriculture and all the routes you can take to prepare for a career. As agricultural technology progresses, the industry will continue to create jobs with crazy pay that our students will not be exposed to; it is an intentional cycle of exclusion."
19. "The issue is that very little recruitment is targeted toward "our" cities or areas where diverse students live. I once sat in a classroom last year and watched the CEO of a company that is the global leader in beef industry research, analysis, and information ask me, "Why I was even here?" if I believed that the agricultural industry is not recruiting in our cities. As if my presence alone represented the inclusion of Black Americans in agricultural spaces."

Coaching and Mentoring

20. "My concern is the lack of representation of Black Males in the industry, which stems significantly from the lack of interest in school. However, the industry has taught me how the system has restrained us too. Also, I am not too fond of the politicking aspect because no matter how hard you work, it is not about what you know; but whom you know and who knows you, and we do not know enough of them, not to mention the boards of leadership, customers, and competitors. I have been up and down the Midwest and south since I graduated. I have yet to see a black farmer. Everybody walks around as if this is okay and supposed to be this way. It almost saddens me when I look deeper into the bigger picture of why things look like this today."
21. "Sometimes, we take us being the only one in the room as not welcome when it might be quite different. Not saying that racism does not exist in other aspects or areas of agriculture. If we just diversified ourselves outside of the stereotypical fields others, as well as ourselves, place us in, that would be a good step for moving in the right direction."
22. "I often feel like a fly in a glass of milk. No support, no acknowledgment, nothing. I am just here, and I know someone is trying to get me out of this space as soon as my colleagues can."
23. "My perspective is different since I am no longer in the traditional agricultural industry. Socially, there was no space for me, and I was unwilling to continue to suffer until there was space. I was intentionally excluded, and my former team deliberately did not train me. I also had a white woman manager who took every opportunity to villainize me and deny me opportunities to advance. My current position has shown me how much I missed professionally during my time with a traditional agricultural company regarding coaching, mentoring, and training. My current role has also shown me the benefits and impact of having a diverse team and a manager who invests in everyone's success."
24. "Two of my main concerns being a Black Ph.D. student enrolled at an R1 agricultural program are: (1) the lack of diversity at the student and faculty level, specifically the lack of Black males and females within that two contexts (faculty; students); and (2) the lack of support from non-Black faculty for the few Black graduate students in ag programs."
25. "There has been perpetual discussion about increasing Diversity within agricultural programs for decades, but very little change in the numbers of Black faculty and students. In fact, my program has seen a steep decline when comparing diversity numbers over the last 20 years. It makes me wonder what is happening to change things not only at the university and programmatic level but also at the overall LGU system level. Some of the onus of this issue also lies with The USDA-NIFA. There are civil rights reviews but no substantive change. Black students are left with faculty that frequently do not see the purpose or need for the Black students' research interests, which stunts the student's research efforts. This skews the 'type' of agricultural related research being conducted and influences the breadth and depth of the research available.

Conclusion

In closing, my purpose today was to share some of the concerns of professional **Everyday People in Agriculture** with whom you may have yet to have the opportunity to converse and engage in a meaningful way. I am sharing the collective insight that motivates some of us to continue integrating this profession we all love.

Different individuals may hold a piece of the answer to solving some of our most challenging problems in agriculture. However, if their **voices are silenced**, their **ideas are shunned**, and their **presence is erased**, WE, as a profession, may be missing a vital component to addressing some of our most pressing issues in agriculture today. **The vibe and energy are different when individuals are genuinely welcomed in spaces.** Intelligent and intuitive people know when they are tolerated and not accepted. **Even if they never share with you how they feel, trust me, they know, and I know.**

Moreover, most people know too when they have mistreated and alienated others. My father used to tell me, "If you can't help someone, surely don't hurt them." Leave that person alone if you do not have anything suitable for them. Instead of challenging the agricultural education profession to change, I encourage you as an individual to make a difference. Consider what small changes you can make that will influence diverse students, all students, to consider the field of agriculture as a possible career choice. Mr. Armstrong started the challenge for me years ago. Over the years, I have been blessed with mentors such as Larry Powers, Carey Ford, Alton Thompson, my friend Antoine Alston, my dissertation co-advisors John Hillison and Daisy Cartwright, whom all made a difference in my life. The lessons they taught me over the years are the same lessons I continue to share with my students, the same challenges to make a difference in their world because we are all everyday people. Dr. King stated, "An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualist concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity." I know time is one of our most precious resources, and I humbly thank you for sharing your time with me today.

References

Nadal, K. (2021). Why representation matters and why it's still not enough: Reflections on growing up brown, queer, and Asian American.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psychology-the-people/202112/why-representation-matters-and-why-it-s-still-not-enough>

Stone, S. (1968). *Everyday people*. Recorded by Sly and the Family Stone. On Album Stand. Epic Records.