

**Partners For Social Change: the building of a multi-institutional leadership development program focused on moving cultural diversity beyond boundaries**

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## **Abstract**

Our purpose is to elaborate on the evolution of a “Partnership for Social Change: Developing Leadership in Agricultural Students” that has provided avenues to enhance collaboration, overcome cultural boundaries and have knowledge transfer between three land-grant institutions. Diversity spanned academic majors, university environments, country of origin and ethnicity. Application of principles for social change by educators involved in curriculum development and catalysis of inter-institutional collaboration will be described.

“A Partnership for Social Change: Developing Leadership in Agricultural Students” was undertaken during 1997 - 2001. In this grant, students from the three Alabama land-grant universities participated in assessing, understanding and practicing leadership skills to impact positive social change and more fully understand others from diverse backgrounds. The program was designed through the collaborative efforts of three key faculty from each university who were supported by a diverse group of students. The diversity spanned, academic majors, classification, country of origin, ethnicity and university environment.

## **Introduction**

Agricultural sector leaders have become insistent that colleges of agriculture adequately prepare graduates to become future leaders in their organizations and in society, equipped with fundamental leadership skills. Since leadership development has not traditionally been taught as a part of a comprehensive agricultural curriculum (exceptions are ag education programs), there was a compelling need to develop an undergraduate leadership development course that would intentionally equip agriculture students with the tools to become effective leadership practitioners upon graduation and employment in the workforce.

A separate but related issue is that of preparing future leaders who will be responsive to needs an increasingly complex and changing society. Changes are occurring at such a rapid and dramatic rate that it is critical that higher education begin to teach our future leaders--typical undergraduates--to confront sensitive social issues and seek common purpose with people who perhaps have heretofore been un-approached or even unapproachable. To be more specific, it was essential that white and black college students forge partnerships to bring about social change, and it is our job as educators to provide a vehicle for this to occur. The main goal of our partnership was to develop an discipline independent approach that accomplishes this.

Although it is generally believed that institutions of higher education in the U.S. adequately

provide students with knowledge necessary to become employed in their chosen fields of endeavor, students often have little understanding of how to be effective both in the workplace and the community. What is lacking in higher education are *intentional* developmental opportunities for all students--not just those in leadership positions--to become effective leaders.

Beyond a need for teaching basic leadership competencies is the lack of emphasis on citizenship as an integral part of leadership. Citizenship is the process whereby an individual becomes responsibly connected to the community and society. To be a good citizen is to work for positive change on behalf of others and the community. Citizenship thus acknowledges the interdependence of all who are involved in or affected by efforts to improve the quality of community life for all. Leadership does not happen in a vacuum; it is relational, and good citizenship should be part of its focus. Another goal of our effort was to establish a unique partnership with the colleges of agriculture of the three land-grant institutions in Alabama: Alabama A&M, Auburn University, and Tuskegee University. Given the history of racial segregation and discrimination in this state, it is imperative that the three schools learn to work collaboratively, adopt attitudes and behaviors that foster understanding and challenge racial stereotyping, provide students with cultural exchange opportunities, and begin to forge long-term commitments to improving the quality of life for the people of this state.

We sensed a compelling need for an inter-institutional leadership development course that emphasizes both the personal and interpersonal dimensions of leadership as well as provides a context for engaging students to develop collaborative action strategies that serve the institution and benefit the greater community. Through our experiences, we had the opportunity to advance the development of core leadership competencies in undergraduates at the three partnership institutions--Alabama A&M University, Auburn University, and Tuskegee University--overcoming traditional cultural and institutional boundaries.

The goals of this paper are to:

- elaborate on the evolution of a project that has provided an avenue to enhance collaboration, overcome cultural boundaries and knowledge transfer between three land grant institutions.
- enable application of principles of the model for social change to educators from any discipline that are involved in curriculum development and evolution of inter-institutional collaboration for enhancing learning and growth.

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