

Country Meets City

Rural, urban youngsters may develop understanding vital for addressing crises.

by Kathleen Phillips

Last year's overly active hurricane season, ominous overtures about flu epidemics and reports of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) boiled down to one issue for Gary Wingenbach — food and water supplies.

But the university educator did more than see that his own family was equipped. He looked at high school students and wondered how they would handle it.

"It struck me watching news coverage of the hurricanes how much we, in more rural areas, do not understand the inner-city, urban plight," said Wingenbach, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station agricultural communications researcher. "And it also occurred to me that people living there — including the first responders — might not be as prepared for the next disaster as someone in a rural area, in terms of supplying nutritious food and water."

Rather than suggest solutions, however, Wingenbach and colleagues from Texas Tech University and Howard College will gather teenagers from several U.S. inner-city high schools together with college students and see what ideas emerge.

The project, funded by almost \$490,000 in grant funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), is being called a "Big City, Big Country Road Show." Wingenbach believes the effort, which begins in September and ends in 2009, will foster a mutual understanding among diverse, younger generations. That, he said, means more city kids will realize there are vital human issues — such as the importance of a food supply — in agriculture, and that there are jobs for those with degrees in the ag field.

Understanding ag

Today's mutual misunderstanding between urban and rural residents, Wingenbach said, is a potential crisis itself. He said that when most pre-college students today hear "agriculture" they believe that university major would lead only to "sitting on a tractor or riding the range on a horse."

While those are extremely important parts of the industry, he added, there are many other related career paths that can link a person directly to local, human issues.

A 2005 study by the USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service predicted a shortfall of about 2,700

qualified people for jobs through 2010. New graduates of the nation's colleges of agriculture and life sciences, forestry and veterinary medicine will fill about 32,300 jobs in the industry each year, the study noted.

"If anything, I am a firm believer that we all have to be concerned about our bare necessities of life — water, nutritious food and adequate shelter," he said. "Will our project lead college and high school students to come up with definitive communications solutions before the next hurricane or tornado? I doubt it. But if these two groups can work together and understand each other's uniquely different viewpoint, I think that will lead to better communication between them."

To that aim, Wingenbach will join Chad Davis from Texas Tech and Cash Berry from Howard College to introduce their students to youth, first in Texas cities and then in large metropolitan areas on the East and West coasts and in the Midwest.

"We have to go where they are," Wingenbach said. "We have to show another side of a career (in agriculture) that is exciting, current and hip — something they can all relate to."

He said select college students will begin this fall to develop the curricula for the "road show." They will gather background materials for case studies by monitoring what news is being covered in particular areas. They also will develop team lessons, group decision-making processes and consensus-building activities.

The following two summers will be spent in U.S. cities where the colleges' agriculture majors will meet with city teens to examine local food or health events covered by news media during the previous six to 12 months.

Crisis communication

The team envisions putting students in the role of a journalist to investigate the facts surrounding mock situations and to get the story to the public. Teams of students from both urban and rural backgrounds would work together to create a crisis communication plan about the event, he explained. Groups will focus on writing skills, digital photography, videography and audio techniques. They will meet with local media in each city for realistic discussions about career potential in the communications field.

"We believe this project provides a brief insight into a career that is very exciting and allows the student to interact with (the) public while using science — be investigators — to extend the most truthful information at hand, all without having to get on a tractor or horse," Wingenbach said. "That's the human science aspect of agriculture."

Coupled with the urban-rural team approach to crisis communication, Wingenbach said, will be a documentary that follows the students' progress in a "reality TV" style currently popular among younger audiences.

The researchers currently are planning to collaborate with a production crew to follow the college students to three U.S. cities for the film.



Editor's Note: Article provided by Texas A&M University's Agricultural Communications department.