Youth Engaging in Agriculture

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Justification

• Minority farmers made up only 4.6% of principal farm operators in North Carolina in 2007 (NASS 2007)
• Of all minority principal farm operators in NC (2007), only 13% were women and 3% were under 35 years old (NASS 2007)
• Underserved and beginning farmers lack access to appropriate farm management and production education and assistance
• The local food system is expanding rapidly in NC, providing opportunities for market entry by new producers.
• Providing a setting to learn and practice farming with minimal financial risk will attract more socially disadvantaged youth to farming

Approach to Training

Beginning Farmer Recruitment Council
• Establish a network of support and guidance for underserved and beginning farmers by assisting with recruitment initiatives and providing guidance on educational programming

Apprenticeship Program
• Socially disadvantaged teenage youth gain practical experience in production agriculture by working with experienced mentor farmers on common farm activities for 10-30 hours per week

Educational Program

Workshops
• Hands-on training in enterprise planning, specialty crop, and livestock production enterprises
• Examples of workshops include business-plan writing, marketing, pest ID and management, soil sampling, high tunnel production, post-harvest handling, and livestock management

On-line modules
• Interactive web-based courses addressing production and marketing of specialty crops for local markets
• Planned courses include Introduction to Sustainable Agriculture, Alternative Enterprises and Production Niches, Specialty Crop Profiles, Small-Scale Production Practices

Profile: Ed Spence and Trey Conway
Spence Family Farms, Spring Lake, NC

Ed Spence decided to become a mentor because he believes it gives youth who otherwise would not have the opportunity, a chance to learn and decide if they want to become entrepreneurs. One of those budding entrepreneurs is Trey Conway, 18. Trey wasn’t sure farming was right for him at first. The work was hard and Trey became frustrated. Ed has a no-nonsense policy on his farm and when problems with apprentices arise he has found it is best to give the young men time to cool off and then bring them back to discuss the problem without judgment. Ed says, “You must be patient with the young people and not prejudge because it may be their first experience working. If you’re not patient you are going to lose them and potentially lose what you have to offer them.”

Ed’s philosophy worked with Trey, who considered quitting, but came back because he had time to reflect. “It broke me down, but I knew it was something I wanted to do,” Trey said. “In my head I knew it would teach me something more about what farming really is. Once I saw this was the real deal, I realized I needed to check myself and go back.” Trey knows he made the right decision because he enjoys farming and likes working outdoors. “There is never a dull moment and it keeps me busy,” Trey said.

Working with Ed has taught Trey perseverance, as well as farming skills. Trey explained: “If you quit you’ll never succeed at anything. I don’t think I would have wanted to farm if I hadn’t started working here. Now that I have seen it and I can do it, I want a farm.” This is exactly the type of attitude Ed loves to see. Ed sees the program as a win-win-win: for the community, the youth and himself. “When they see it is something they can do and stick with it, they will realize they can stay productive here and not go away, it has to bring a level of gratification,” he said. Ed feels as gratified as his protégé. He helps Trey achieve his goals and Trey has found a role model. Both agree this program is the foundation of a long-term relationship.

Target Audience

• Limited-resource, socially disadvantaged teenage youth interested in agricultural careers
• Minority males and females of diverse ethnicities

Accomplishments

• Thirty-one limited-resource, socially disadvantaged youth participated in the apprenticeship program and workshop series, with 28 completing the first-year program
• Apprentices reported that participation in this program helped increase their understanding of topics related to horticultural crop production, sustainable soil and pest management, high tunnel production, planning a new agribusiness, and marketing
• Mentors have observed improved teamwork, communications skills, and a sense of personal responsibility amongst the youth
• Exposure to university programs has increased interest in higher education among the apprentices

Partners

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Operation Spring Plant – Henderson/Oxford, NC
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Sandhills Family Heritage Association – Spring Lake, NC

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