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# MISPERCEPTIONS CLOUD STUDENTS' OPINIONS OF AGRICULTURAL CAREERS

— by Teddee Grace —

Colleges of agriculture along with agribusiness are challenged today to halt the decline of student enrollment in agricultural curriculum. A survey of high school students published recently by the Farm Foundation of Oak Brook, IL indicates that there are many obstacles to overcome. However, with vigorous efforts, capable and bright students can be attracted to agricultural curriculum of the nation's land grant universities. But it won't be easy.

All students surveyed, even those intending to major in agriculture, hold many misperceptions about agriculture-related careers and majors, according to the study conducted by the American College Testing (ACT) Program, Iowa City, Iowa, administrators of the ACT tests used to determine college eligibility of U. S. high school students. Survey results reveal those students intending to major in nonagricultural fields have a particularly limited awareness of agricultural colleges, agricultural majors and agricultural careers.

The survey reveals that individuals employed in the profession of interest exert the strongest influence on college major and career choices. Fathers, high school teachers and mothers rank second, third and fourth respectively while newspapers and magazines have some influence. Those surveyed said personal inter-

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## What Changed Their Minds?

In important findings not within the original objectives of the "High School Student Perceptions of Agricultural College Majors and Careers" survey, 38 percent (128 of 337) of the students originally reporting an agriculture-related college major had changed to a nonagricultural-related major by the time they completed the survey less than one year later. This implies "that someone or something influences these young people to abandon agriculture as a college major and career choice..." according to an Executive Summary of the survey. However, the influences were not identified by this study.

ests and personal happiness were more important than money or income potential in choosing a major or career and most students made their choices during their junior year.

Two samples of ACT-tested high school students were randomly selected from the more than one million juniors and seniors who completed the ACT Assessment during the 1987-88 academic school year. Both samples were selected proportionally, by state, to be representative of college-bound high school juniors and seniors nationwide. Sample One consisted of 810 students who had reported agriculture or a related area as a college major. The 2,549 students in Sample Two had selected other majors or were undecided.

Major findings reveal that more than two-thirds (70 percent) of all respondents either disagreed with, or were not aware of, the contention that graduates with agriculture-related majors often pursue business careers and 71 percent disagreed with, or were not aware of, the contention that such graduates are sought after by many multinational corporations.

The majority of students thought most agriculture-related careers involved working outdoors and were very dependent on weather conditions and 42 percent of the nonagricultural group thought most agriculture careers required extensive knowledge of farms and farming. About 70 percent of the nonagricultural group agreed with, or were uncertain about, the contention that job opportunities in agriculture-related careers were declining and that most agriculture-related careers involved or required manual labor.

## For Report

Copies of the Executive Summary of the findings of the survey of students can be obtained from The Farm Foundation, 1211 W. 22nd Street, Suite 216, Oak Brook, IL 60521. Ask for *High School Student Perceptions of Agricultural College Majors and Careers*, April 1989.

## Did You Know That...

- Since 1979 the enrollment in the University of Illinois College of Agriculture has dropped from 1,752 students to 1,174.
- Over the last ten years the percentage of males and females in the college has remained about the same with 64% men and 36% women.
- In the fall of 1989, one third of the freshman class had a farm background.
- Of the fall 1989 freshmen 60% had no high school agriculture classes and 23% had 4 years of high school ag. The remainder were evenly split between 1, 2 and 3 years of agriculture classes.

—Taken from Fall 1989 *Nabor Nubbins*.

## Have You Read —

*AID, Trade, and Farm Policies*, a paper back published by Winrock International? The book is based on a January 1989 workshop sponsored by Winrock and USAID. It focuses on the interrelationships and the issues surrounding international assistance for agricultural development. Copies are free. Write to: Wayne E. Swegle, Director of Public Affairs and Communication, Winrock International, Petit Jean Mountain, Morrilton, AR 72110.

## Do You Have A Copy Of —

*Agricultural-Food Policy Review*, Agricultural Economic Report Number 620 of the Economic Research Service, USDA? The book is an excellent source of information helpful in understanding agricultural policies and for "looking to the future for new agricultural, environmental and rural development issues." This nearly 400 page book has three major sections—U.S. Agricultural Policies in the 1980s, Current Policies and Programs, and Emerging Issues. Copies are available for \$12 by writing to ERS-NASS, P.O. Box 1608, Rockville, MD 20849-1608.