

Teaching and Educational Methods

Teaching about Diversity and Racism in Food Systems: An Example for Agricultural Economics and Related Departments

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Abstract

This paper presents curriculum and metrics for a course titled *U.S. Food, Social Equity & Development*, taught since 2015. The course meets a race and racism diversity course requirement at the University of Vermont. Departments affiliated with AAEA have an obligation to teach and inform our students about racism in the food system: individual and systemic, intended and unintended, institutional and structural. This has been reinforced by the June 3, 2020, AAEA statement condemning racially motivated acts of violence, police brutality, and overreach of military action, and committed to pledging positive action toward diversity, equity, and inclusion. By understanding the opportunity associated with our obligation, we will graduate future professionals and scholars who understand the importance of including issues of racism in their research; future food producers who will better recognize and attend to the issue of racism; and future consumers who understand how their consumption decisions impact racism.

1 Introduction

On June 3, 2020, the AAEA drafted a statement condemning racially motivated acts of violence, police brutality, and overreach of military action, and committed to pledging positive action toward diversity, equity, and inclusion. The statement went on to say:

As an organization, our responsibility is to remain a platform for rigorous research on a breadth of societal issues, engaged public discourse across a diverse set of stakeholders, and to inform discussions and policies that can help refine and strengthen the frayed social fabric. . . . Let us pledge ourselves to these principles and rededicate ourselves to the mission of striving toward a just society that needs engaged, empathetic, and intelligent education, science-based and community-driven research, and engaged scholars more than ever (Agricultural and Applied Economics Association Executive Board 2020).

To adhere to this responsibility, we contend that we have an obligation to teach our students about the historical injustices on which the current food system is built, analyze (impacts of and potential solutions to) current manifestations of racism in the food system, establish an ethical orientation around the pursuit of an antiracist food system, and equip our students with skills to pursue social—and specifically racial—justice in the food system. Our students, after all, will be employed by, conduct research about, and promulgate policies for our food system from basic science through production, consumption, and disposal.

Our commitment as educators and researchers to an antiracist food system (see Kendi 2019 for a full discussion on antiracism) is based in the explicit recognition that racism exists in our agricultural and broader food system, as individual and institutional racism (un)intentionally reinforces each another and

generates racial disparities (Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre n.d.; Inter-Institutional Network for Food, Agriculture, and Sustainability 2018). Even a cursory examination reveals racism is deeply embedded in the food system. Violence and manipulation sanctioned by the federal government resulted in Native Americans being forcibly moved from their ancestral lands and relocated in the West, providing white Americans with large swaths of land to build an agricultural economy reliant on slave labor (Dunbar-Ortiz 2015). After slavery was abolished, Blacks began to acquire plots of land until the early twentieth century when institutional racism enacted through a myriad of ways (e.g., Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, heirs' property, discriminatory lending practices) contributed to the dispossession of up to 90 percent of Black-owned farmland over the course of the twentieth century (Gilbert et al. 2002; Hinson and Robinson 2008; Figueora and Penniman 2020). In addition to the current racial disparities in land access, labor exploitation in the agrifood system is racialized. People of color disproportionately experience dangerous working conditions, lower pay, and barriers to enact basic labor rights across the food chain, including in farm work, meatpacking, and restaurant work (Pfeffer 1983; Perea 2011; Jayaraman 2013; Miraftab 2016). And racial disparities are apparent in the outcomes of the food system as well, with people of color more likely to experience food insecurity and obesity (Odoms-Young and Bruce 2018; Petersen, Pan, and Blanck 2019).

These current manifestations of racism in the food system are inherently, though not exclusively, economic. They are fundamentally tied to questions of access to and distribution of resources. It is therefore imperative for us to include education that covers this material as it relates to agricultural economics and the other disciplines we increasingly find in our departments, including rural sociology, applied and consumer economics, and community development. Indeed, this shift toward combining several disciplines in former agricultural economic centric departments has occurred since the 1970s and intensified in the 1990s (National Research Council 1995; Agricultural and Applied Economics Association n.d.). Despite the tumult that these types of mergers have caused, they also provide opportunity to ask and answer more nuanced questions about food systems generally and the role of race and racism in them specifically. As a dynamic social construct, investigating the mutual effects between racism and agricultural economics will benefit from interdisciplinary perspectives. It was, after all, the rural sociological work of W.E.B. Du Bois that established an "emancipatory empiricism," which interrogated prevailing racist assumptions, identified race as a social category, and pointed to policy options pursuing social equity (Jakubek and Wood 2018).

Expanding our teaching to earnestly engage in issues of race and racism will expand our scholarship on these issues, a need based on a relatively quick search of the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* on Oxford Academic. The Oxford Academic database contains 9,658 AJAE research articles and 1,890 AJAE discussion articles in total. The first search was narrowed to refereed journal articles. In the history of the journal, there are 0 articles with the word *racism* in the title; 11 articles with racism mentioned anywhere in an article, and 5 articles with the word *race* in the title. Neither *race*, *racism*, nor *racial discrimination* appeared in keywords, and only 5 discussion articles mentioned racial discrimination, with a search starting in 1959. The moment, and more importantly the moral imperative, demands that we, the producers and reproducers of agricultural economics as a discipline, take race and racism more into account in our work, contributing an agricultural economics perspective on the manifestations and impacts of racism within the food system.

Of course, we recognize that isolating racial categories is precarious work that risks reductionism and distortions. We concur with the insights of feminist theory (e.g., Crenshaw 1989), methods (e.g., Naples 2003), and empirical work (e.g., Quisumbing et al. 2014) that human identities and experiences with the world result from the intersection of a multitude of identities. To this point, we also assessed the prevalence of gender issues within our literature search, while also acknowledging that many other identities (e.g., age, disabilities, sexual orientation, etc.) also mediate power and privilege. There are 5 articles with *gender* in the title and 4 with *gender discrimination* in the title. A keyword search of gender discrimination produced zero discussion articles. As a reflection of our research, it is clear that race and gender are not at the forefront, despite their importance in mediating access to and distribution of

resources. Complex and dynamic as these social categories are, they require our scholarly attention, as well as explicit acknowledgments of the limitations of our research, but demand that we do not eschew them.

As we are well aware, the applied research that we collectively conduct lends itself to integration with teaching. Teaching issues of race and racism may yield productive inroads into the disciplinary contributions of agricultural economics to issues of racism in the food system in multiple ways. One likelihood is that agricultural economists committed to teaching about racism in food systems identify new research questions. Another, likely even more impactful, is that we train the future generation of scholars and practitioners who are even better poised to address social injustice. In our teaching moving forward, future scholars will understand the importance of including these issues in their research, future food producers will better recognize and attend to the issue of racism, and future consumers will understand how their consumption decisions impact racism.

The National Academies Press publication by the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council (2015) includes an entire chapter on “Social and Economic Effects of the U.S. Food System.” It includes what they consider three broad classes of social and economic effects. Racism is embedded in each. The categories include:

1. Levels of income, wealth, and distributional equity;
2. Broader indicators of quality of life, such as working conditions, job satisfaction, and freedom of choice to pursue taste and lifestyle preferences; and
3. Associated impacts on worker health and well-being (167).

The goal of this paper is to provide an overview of a course developed to teach about racism through the lens of the food system. The objectives of this commentary are to: (i) describe our approach to teaching about racism in the context of the food system, (ii) present information on enrollments, and (iii) provide course materials used in a class taught eight times since 2015 at the University of Vermont (UVM) in the Department of Community Development and Applied Economics (CDAE) in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS). *U.S. Food, Social Equity & Development* is a three-credit introductory level course that meets a diversity requirement at UVM.¹ The course description explains that it “provides an introduction to gender, race, class, and ethnicity with particular emphasis on food, population, economic, and ecological issues in sustainable agriculture, food systems, and community development. The geographical focus emphasizes the United States.”

2 Course Approach

U.S. Food, Social Equity, and Development has been taught as a lecture-based and hybrid course. The overarching purpose of this course is summarized to students in the syllabus:

Structural racism and injustice are defining attributes of our society and so are inherently embedded within our food systems. As a Diversity course, the content of this course describes how and why structural racism shapes the U.S. food system and the ways that this system contributes to (or, in some cases, seeks to address) structural racism and inequity.

Because topic areas range, for example, from production through consumption, historical and

¹ All undergraduate degree students matriculating in Fall 2008 or later must successfully complete the university-approved diversity courses: one three-credit course from Category One (Race and Racism in the United States), and a second three-credit course from either Category One or Category Two (the Diversity of Human Experience). These requirements will apply as well to undergraduate transfer students receiving bachelor’s degrees from May 2012 onward (uvm.edu).

current economic policy (e.g., the Farm Bill), agricultural labor, and industrial organization in the agricultural (and other) value chain(s), it is not difficult to place this course in a agricultural economics related department.²

During Spring 2020, because of COVID-19, the course became online only after spring break (with half the semester remaining). The course can be relatively easily adapted to a remote learning format in either a synchronous or asynchronous online format. Our description focuses on the hybrid approach, which adapted the lecture-based course. At UVM, our teaching platform is Blackboard and incorporates universal design for learning principles (UDL) that are built into that platform. “UDL is an educational approach based on the learning sciences with three primary principles—multiple means of representation of information, multiple means of student action and expression, and multiple means of student engagement” (Center for Applied Special Technology n.d.b.). UDL explicitly means that the course is accessible. Accessibility includes all aspects of the course, from the way material is presented to the way students are assessed. And, for a course in which 75 percent of the material is related to racism, accessibility also includes aspects of emotional learning, student comfort, and social learning (Center for Applied Special Technology n.d.a.). In the case of this course, accessibility also means meeting the needs of students from first year through seniors, even though the course is entry level. We often quip to the students, “this course is a mile wide and an inch deep.” The course covers a lot of material, as seen in the course modules in the online supplementary Appendix A. Part of UDL is that the material is presented in a variety of ways. In each unit/module, students have a reading, typically one more “popular” and one more “academic,” often with an audio clip and a video clip. We follow the idea of read, listen, view, but not necessarily in that order. There are 21 short online quizzes that follow the modules. Students can take the multiple choice/matching quizzes more than once and up to three times (depending on quiz length). These are automatically graded in Blackboard, and students receive immediate feedback. The lowest three scores are dropped. There are six varied assignments due throughout the 15-week semester. While these are all writing assignments, they cover a variety of writing types and include reflection, annotated reference, movie critique, and opinion editorial. As a blended course (hybrid), in-class time incorporates some lecture and typically an in-class group assignment designed around a current event. Online supplementary Appendix B provides a list of assignments, and online supplementary Appendix C provides examples of in-class assignments.

The learning goals of the course are provided at a general and more specific level. Assignments, in-class exercises, and exams are designed to assess these goals.

Course Learning Goals

General

At the end of this course, students will have:

1. Developed an awareness of the diversity of individuals, cultures, communities, and process issues as they relate to U.S. food systems;
2. Developed an awareness of race and racism in the United States at the individual or systemic levels including historical and/or contemporary issues in the U.S. food system;
3. Analyzed arguments, processes, and debates including conflicting and multiple perspectives related to race and racism in U.S. food systems; and
4. Demonstrated the ability to apply theoretical knowledge to recognize and name dynamics and/or problem-solve in specific cases related to race and racism in the U.S. food system.

² Each of the examples above has a *Journal of Economic Literature* code. Examples include D-Microeconomics (e.g., household behavior and family economics, production and organizations, distribution and market structure, pricing, and design), I-Health, education, and welfare (e.g., health and inequality), J-Demographics, labor economics, labor policy (e.g., wages, compensation, and labor costs and mobility, unemployment, vacancies, and immigrant workers), I-Industrial organization, N-Economic history, and of course, Q-Agricultural economics.

Specific

At the end of this course, students will:

1. Understand and be able to actively participate in a variety of debates related to poverty, race, and sustainable development. These include politics surrounding the food system, hunger in the United States, food justice, consumer ethics, food and identity, working conditions on farms, jobs in the food industry, and public health concerns;
2. Understand how societies shape food and agricultural systems and how food and agriculture shape societies; and
3. Have exposure and an entry level understanding of current policy, events, and published literature in food systems.

While the course employs principles of universal design and can be taught in a variety of formats, from lecture-based to hybrid to fully online (as we experienced during the Spring 2020 COVID-19 pandemic), the course utilizes a variety of other pedagogies to engage students. These additional pedagogies are especially important given the complexity and challenges that are inevitable when engaging in issues of race and racism. In-class, small group discussions were a part of several of the lecture sessions. These discussions introduced students to their “neighbors” and provided a safer place for interaction in a large class. The quizzes were structured for assessment and continued learning, as students were permitted to take the 21 quizzes more than once, online. The questions were randomized to decrease memorization of answers given the multiple choice and matching format. The semester began with an introduction to systems thinking. While students found much of the material to be difficult and emotionally draining, the course ended with a module on change making, which brought a more upbeat ending to the semester. Two assignments were reflective. Students explored their place in the food system, both using a family history and “where they are now” approach. The course provided information in both historical and contemporary contexts, including a history of agricultural labor and immigration. Overall, using a variety of pedagogies and providing a safe space to discuss unsettling material appears to provide students with a positive learning experience, based on student assessments in class and student evaluations of the course.

3 Course Metrics

CDAE piloted U.S. Food, Social Equity, and Development in Spring 2015. The course obtained a permanent number in 2016 and has remained the *only* permanent “Diversity 1” (D1) course taught in CALS since that time. Figure 1 shows the trajectory of enrollments. The course fills at capacity or above, regardless of how many seats are provided. The first year the class was capped at 50. The next three years had a cap of 75. We increased the cap to 90 in 2019. That has been increased to 120 for Fall 2020, and as of publication enrollment is now 130. Across the eight offerings, 683 students enrolled in the course. Students are interested in the material.

While we do not share student evaluation comments, the majority of students were hungry to read, see, listen to, and discuss the material. Taught by 4 different faculty members, student evaluations were numerically higher (4+ out of 5 on a 5-point Likert Scale), but not statistically different, than the CDAE course average across all courses taught, ranging from communication design to introductory and intermediate microeconomics, and introduction to entrepreneurship to research methods.

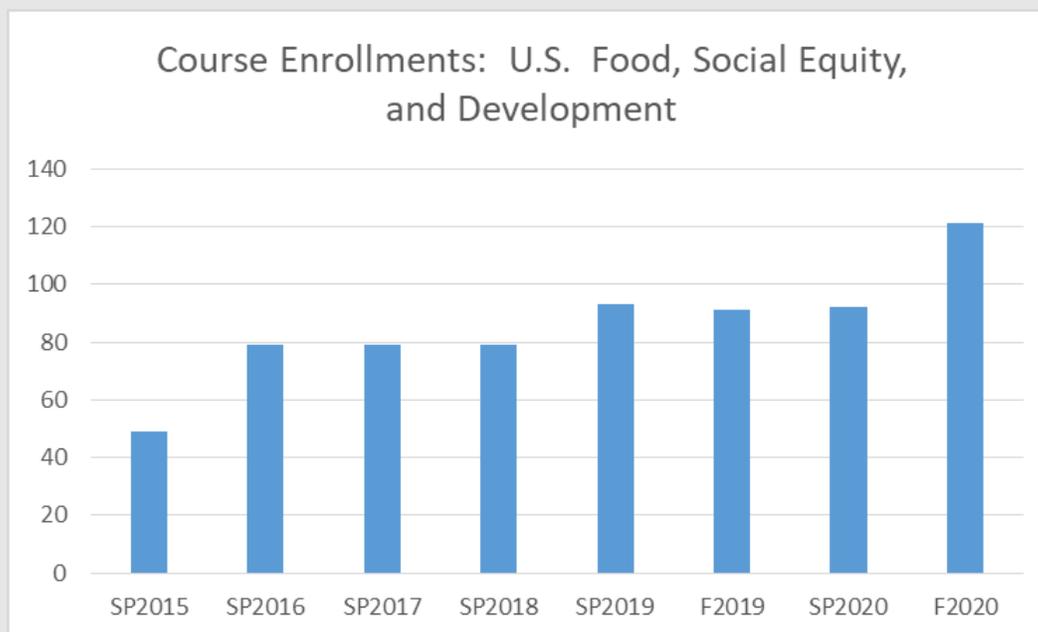


Figure 1. Course Enrollments over Time

The first TA for the course was compelled to write an article about her experience and the need for such courses in any curriculum that addresses the food system (Peña 2015). A quote is powerful:

I was engaged in the class as an empowered learner. With the knowledge gained subsequently, I see myself taking the next steps as an empowered doer. In diversity courses offered by land-grant universities, an emphasis on empowerment and change will encourage white and minority students to examine both their own and others' personal barriers (Pena 2015, p. 124).

Who enrolled in the course? The course is required for food systems majors. Food systems is a transdisciplinary major offered in CALS and sits at the college, not department level. For all other students, CDAE 004 is a choice that meets the D1 university-wide requirement.³ The university has offered between 48 and 59 D1 courses per year since 2014. Although this is an introductory level class (00 level at UVM = introductory), the majority of students enrolled were either sophomores or juniors, followed by equal numbers of first-year students and seniors (see Figure 2).

Although offered in CALS, the majority of enrollees were from other colleges (60 percent; see Figure 3). Enrolled students came from every college with undergraduate major offerings at UVM (see Figure 4).

³ UVM's diversity requirement is intended to provide undergraduate students with the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to function productively in a complex global society, by fostering an understanding of and respect for differences among individuals and groups of people. A D1 course addresses race and racism in the United States.

ENROLLMENTS BY CLASS YEAR (N = 683)

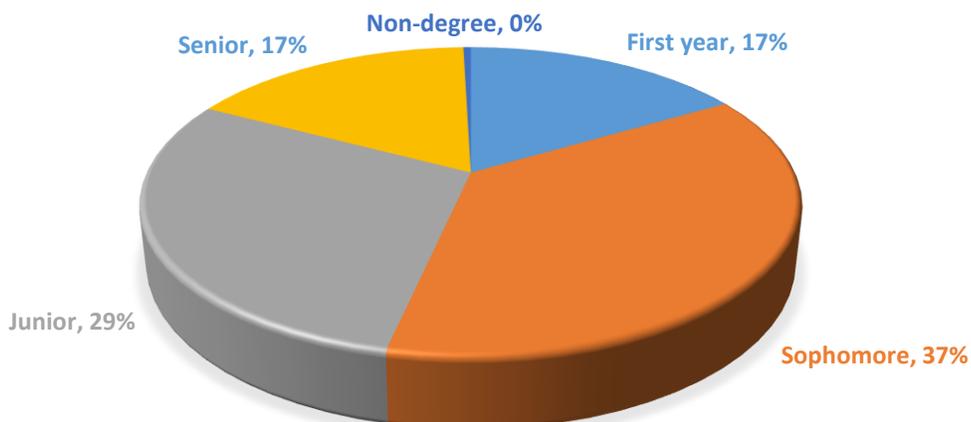


Figure 2. Student Enrollments by Class (2015–2020)

ENROLLMENTS—COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE AND LIFE SCIENCE VS OTHER (N = 683)

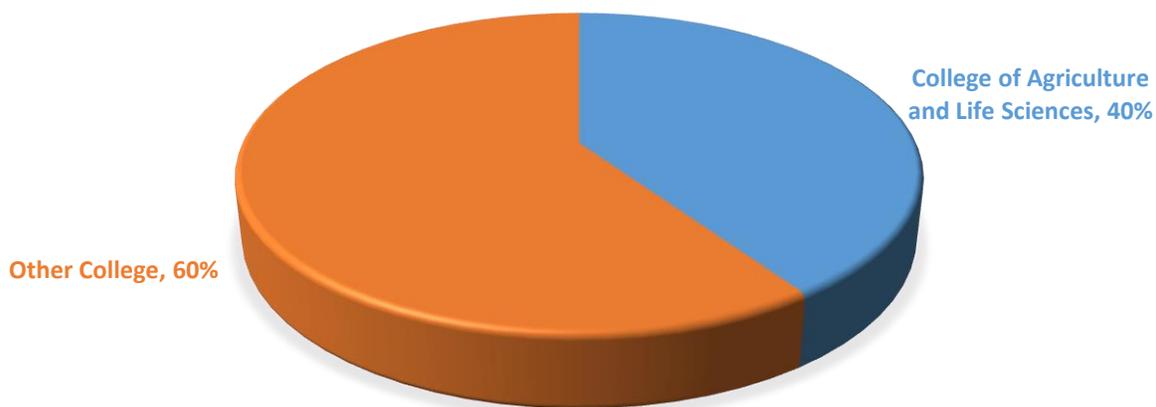


Figure 3. Enrollments: College of Agriculture and Life Sciences versus Other Colleges (2015–2020)

ENROLLMENTS BY COLLEGE (N = 683)

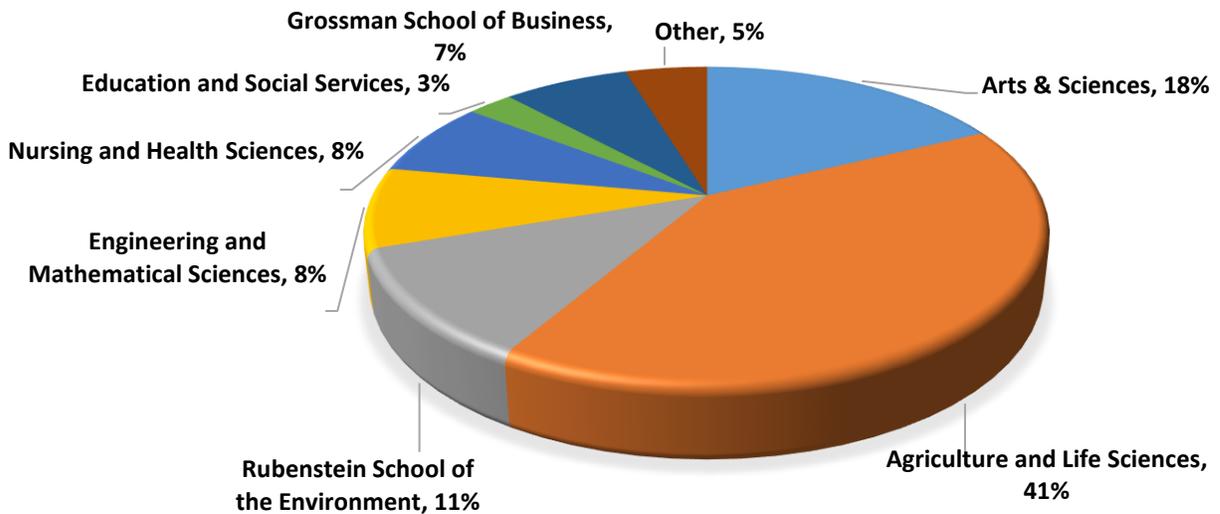


Figure 4. Student Enrollments by College (2015–2020)

MAJORS IN THE COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE AND LIFE SCIENCES (N = 276)

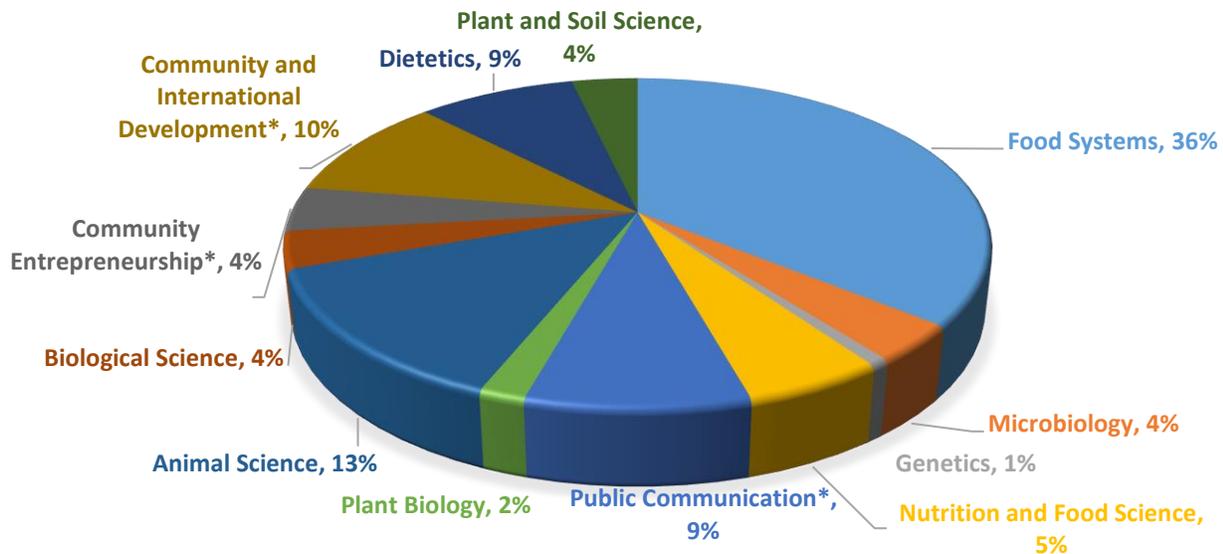


Figure 5. Majors within CALS (2015–2020)

*Majors in the offering department (Community Development and Applied Economics-CDAE)

Because CDAE 004 is a required course for food systems majors, these majors had the highest representation of enrollees (36 percent; see figure 5). Twenty-three percent of students enrolled were majors in the offering department most closely associated with AAEA—CDAE. Every major in CALS was represented, ranging from basic to applied natural, life, and social science.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

Education in our now expanded disciplines go beyond traditional agricultural economics and now include rural sociology, consumer economics, and community development, to name a few. The potential for interdisciplinarity that is housed in our departments provide us with key tools to effectively respond to the statement that the AAEA has made about our organization's and discipline's obligations regarding race and racism. If we are to take action based on the written statement, it is important that we face agriculture's involvement in individual and structural racism, incorporate teaching about racism in our curricula, and not to rely on departments in other colleges in our universities to carry the load. We believe that to heed this call, educators must construct and instruct these types of courses from a position of co-learning, by which the instructor makes clear that they, along with their students, are in a constant process of self-reflexivity and improvement. Kendi (2019) asserts, being racist or antiracist is not a static status but an ongoing pursuit. Of course, faculty are responsible for building their own courses and materials. The focus of this commentary is how one university, in CALS, in one AAEA-affiliated department developed and delivered a course on race and racism in the food system.

While outside some of our teaching toolboxes, there are more opportunities than barriers to incorporating such a class into our department offerings. First, we can provide students with knowledge and the opportunity to reflect. Second, we can reach a wide variety of students from majors across our campuses who may otherwise not be familiar with our field or the concept of agricultural and food systems. Third, we can open the door to open discussions with students as well as with our colleagues. Fourth, we may find that more students are interested in our field.

We can advance our disciplines by facing individual and structural racism that has impacted agricultural historically and in contemporary society. There is more to agriculture and food systems than simply efficient production. It is through actions such as teaching about racism in the food system that will help us reach "our responsibility is to remain a platform for rigorous research on a breadth of societal issues, engaged public discourse across a diverse set of stakeholders and to inform discussions and policies that can help refine and strengthen the frayed social fabric" (Agricultural and Applied Economics Association Executive Board 2020).

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