

IT'S
YOUR
TIME

Retooling

by Jeff Mulhollem



College Making Natural Connections to Attract Students

Louisiana State University's College of Agriculture, where he served on the faculty and later was associate dean for student services, but he suspects the trend was national in scope.

"Due to economic hard times and natural causes such as droughts, farms were being foreclosed at a record pace, and stereotypes of the poor, overworked farmer and a struggling industry had become common," recalls the associate dean for undergraduate education in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

"You couldn't pick up a newspaper without seeing headlines about all the hardships and production farms going under—you heard it over and over on newscasts. If you were seventeen years old at that time and at all paying attention, no way would you want anything to do with agriculture. It became difficult to persuade students to consider majors in the ag sciences."

That period was a wake-up call for College of Agricultural Sciences leaders, who watched declining enrollments with growing alarm and decided they needed to offer some new majors and change the way they promoted the curricula offered by the college. "Our college offers an incredibly diverse array of educational opportunities," says Fernandez. "Our continual challenge is to make students, their parents, and even their high school teachers understand the breadth and depth of who we are in ag and renewable resources.

It was sometime in the 1990s, Marcos Fernandez believes, when agriculture's image fell to its lowest point and began to hinder the ability of American colleges of agriculture to attract students. He saw the phenomenon at Louisiana State University's College of Agriculture, where he served on the faculty and later was associate dean for student services, but he suspects the trend was national in scope.



University marketing specialist Cyndee Graves (right) oversees a recruiting photo session while Toronto, Canada-based photographer Jason Jones and his assistant work at the Forest Resources Lab greenhouse.

We need to make it clear that the education we offer can prepare students to take on very important careers."

But something changed in society a decade or so ago, according to Fernandez, that has made the agricultural sciences appear more vital and relevant to society and, hence, more attractive to students. "There seems to be a number of things going on that, combined, have elevated the importance of the agricultural sciences in students' eyes," he says. "The need for biofuels to help replace oil is certainly a driving factor, as are the concern for food security and worries about global climate change. Students now see the ag sciences as a field where they can make a difference and—to put it in a seventeen-year-old's terms—'have an awesome career.'"

Historical statistics illustrate the challenge the college faced. According to data supplied by the Penn State Alumni Association, the number of students

graduating from the College of Agricultural Sciences fell steadily from its peak in 1979—when more than 1,000 students received degrees—to 2004, when the college graduated about half that many.

Official University enrollment figures paint a similar picture: in 1997, undergraduate students enrolled in the college at the University Park campus numbered just over 2,000, but within six years, that number had dropped 29 percent, to a low of 1,430.

The downward trend was occurring across the country, even in the intensely agricultural land-grant universities of the Midwest. For instance, at the University of Nebraska's College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, enrollment plummeted by 21 percent between 1996 and 2004—from 1,523 to 1,222 students. That college's peak enrollment of nearly 1,900 occurred in 1980.

Fernandez says the handwriting was on the wall at Penn State and convinced most faculty, staff, and administrators that the educational offerings of the College of Agricultural Sciences had to be promoted in a different way. University Marketing was consulted, and eventually the "ThinkAGain" campaign was born.

Cyndee Graves, assistant director of university marketing and advertising, recalls that repositioning the College of Agricultural Sciences was straightforward but extensive. "When we reviewed the materials that were being used by the College of Ag Sciences, several things hit us right away," she says. "The photos were very dated—they looked like they were twenty-five years old. Everywhere we looked, there was a farmer on a tractor or cows in a field. Those images didn't really represent the college's new fields of study, such as Toxicology or Immunology and Infectious Disease.

"There was so much about the college that was not being communicated," Graves adds. "So we brought in a photographer and began taking photos of current students in current styles, placing more of an emphasis on the hands-on science being offered by the college. We repositioned the college as an active college that offers education in much more than traditional agriculture."

Marcos Fernandez (left) talks with Ag Sciences students at the Bryce Jordan Center during Ag Career Day, an annual event when students in the college have an opportunity to meet with potential employers from across the country.



All the materials developed by the University Marketing and University Publications teams emphasized that there is much more than classroom work involved in College of Agricultural Sciences' majors. The materials feature fewer words with brief bulleted points, brighter colors, and stronger images. "Another focus was to rebuild the college's Web site for future students with a design and images that appeal to today's youth, adding videos," Graves says. "We know that today's teens want to hear from their peers rather than have adults lecturing to them, so the videos feature relatable students talking about the highlights of their majors and experiences in the College of Ag Sciences."

And the effort has paid off. As reported by the University in its annual mid-October "snapshot" of student numbers, the college's fall-semester enrollment at University Park rose by 8 percent to 1,656 in 2008, the third increase in as many years. By comparison, University-wide enrollment was up by about 3.2 percent last fall.

Similarly, when you include students not counted by the University in the college's official numbers—

College marketing specialist Jonathan Ziegler agrees that both societal changes and an improved image are responsible for the college's turnaround in recruiting fortunes.

such as those enrolled in agricultural majors at other Penn State campuses, in the college's certificate programs, and in joint programs administered with (and officially counted by) other Penn State academic colleges—the number of undergraduates served by the College of Agricultural Sciences has swelled by nearly 22 percent over the last three years to more

than 2,500. The biggest gains have been in the Animal Sciences, Turfgrass Science, Wood Products, and Agricultural Science majors. Also seeing gains were the newer majors of Toxicology; Immunology and Infectious Disease; and Community, Environment, and Development.

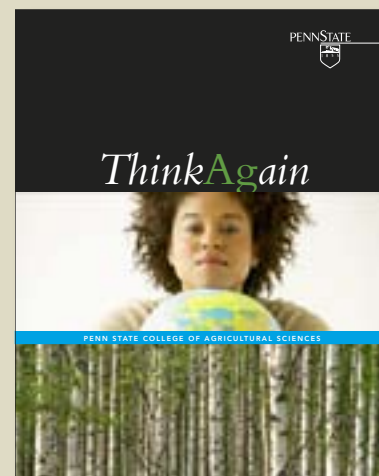
The image facelift for the College of Agricultural Sciences was the broadest work done by University Marketing for any Penn State college, Graves concedes, but she credits leaders in the college for making the changes work. "The need to change an outdated image is not particular to the College of Ag Scienc-



Magazine ad



Future students Web site (thinkagain.psu.edu)



College Viewbook

University marketing experts helped design new, more effective recruiting materials featuring current students and emphasizing the cutting-edge science and hands-on opportunities offered by majors in the college.

es. In general, people tend to do what they know and what works—and they just keep doing it over and over again for years,” she says.

College marketing specialist Jonathan Ziegler agrees that both societal changes and an improved image are responsible for the college’s turnaround in recruiting fortunes. “The public perceives us not just as a college but as an industry,” he says. “In society at large, the perception is starting to change with the research and breakthroughs in biofuels. That has refocused the public’s attention back on agriculture, and it is our job as educators to take this opportunity to portray the industry in a way that reflects its relevance in a changing world.

“That has been part of our problem. I don’t think ag has done a very good job over the years of promoting what we do—it’s the culture of ag not to brag about or talk up our role in society.”

Ziegler concedes that recruiting students for Penn State’s College of Agricultural Sciences—indeed for any college of ag sciences—is challenging in a society that has largely lost its connection to the land. “We are coming into the third generation of people in this country who don’t know where our food comes from,” he says. “Increasing agricultural literacy and awareness might be the most critical of the college’s strategic priorities. It’s up to us to help people understand why the agricultural sciences should matter to them.”

From Fernandez’s point of view, increasing enrollment in the college is all about focus. “Part of the success we are seeing now is because we are all in sync,” he says. “The faculty, staff, and administration see recruiting students as affecting us personally. Everybody from alumni to the ag industry sees it as critical. Even Penn State Cooperative Extension has made recruiting students and showcasing the educational opportunities in the college one of its goals.”

Another reason more students are willing to major in the agricultural sciences, Fernandez contends, is because word has gotten out about the many opportunities that await graduates. “Placement of our graduates is over 85 percent in jobs that are either directly or closely related to their field of study.”

Marianne Fivek has been on the front lines of the battle to attract students for more than twenty-two years. The college’s recruiting coordinator has seen many things change, perhaps the most significant of which was increasing academic requirements for students to be admitted to the college at University Park. Another critical difference Fivek has witnessed is a shift in societal attitudes toward agriculture and the environment.

“But our philosophy is the same now as it was

back in the 1980s when I started—we are just trying to get the word out about the breadth of opportunities in the ag sciences,” she says. “We have much to offer in addition to majors commonly associated with traditional agriculture. Our college has been adding some cutting-edge curricula.”

Fivek cites the new marketing campaign and the decision by all academic departments in the college to create student-specialist positions as a turning point in the recruiting battle. “We have always had wonderful things to offer prospective students, but for many years we didn’t get the word out,” she says. “We are doing a better job now, but there is no doubt that environmental concerns have contributed to our cause. Society has an increased environmental consciousness now.”

One of those student-recruiting specialists, Jana Peters in the Department of Dairy and Animal Science, says the fact that many prospective students want to work with animals makes her job easier. “There is a tremendous interest in veterinary medicine among kids who come to the college,” she explains. “Then for some, the dream meets reality and they see that the pre-vet curriculum is too tough for them, and they find other majors, mostly in our college.”

Kids want to come to Penn State, Peters says. And the football team’s recent success has attracted the attention of a lot of prospective students and their families. But she suspects high food and fuel prices and the prospects of emerging energy technologies, such as ethanol from biomass, are making students and their families think about agriculture—or at least be open to ag careers—in a way they haven’t been for decades. “It definitely has something to do with green energy,” she says. “That and our marketing campaign is making a big difference in attracting students.

“One key thing is that in our brochures,” Peters adds, “the kids always look like they are having fun—that’s so important.”

Peters credits the college with recognizing that it needed to have student recruiters on staff to do student-service work in every academic department. “For a long time, I was the only departmental person who was devoted to recruiting,” she recalls. “You can’t depend only on faculty to do that. Now, just about every department has those positions filled. As a college, we are more student centered, and it is showing in our enrollment numbers.”

Perhaps the one part of the college that is less affected by society losing its connection to the land is the School of Forest Resources, where coordinator for undergraduate programs Jamie Murphy sees most students still being the outdoors type. “We are in a bit of a unique position in Pennsylvania because of the



Jamie Murphy, undergraduate programs coordinator in the School of Forest Resources, often uses a wooded area of The Arboretum at Penn State as a “classroom” for students in her freshman seminar class.

“We believe the forestry tradition and the outdoor ethic is so strong in Pennsylvania that we’ll continue to attract students.”

of Forest Resources because they enjoy outdoor pursuits. The students who are completely disconnected from the land are less likely to pick our majors.”

Murphy says faculty and administrators in the School of Forest Resources are aware of the growth of what author Richard Louv (*Last Child in the Woods*) characterized as “Nature Deficit Disorder,” and they realize it has reduced the pool of students interested in majors the school offers. “But we believe the forestry tradition and the outdoor ethic is so strong in Pennsylvania that we’ll continue to attract students. Most of our students come from rural areas, and they come precisely because they are connected to the land. That said, our school works to educate the

state’s strong sportsmen’s heritage and large rural population,” she says. “We still have a very strong contingent of students here who have grown up hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, and cutting wood,” she says. “I have talked to people in some other universities who say most of their students picked their majors because they watched Animal Planet, whereas here the kids usually pick our School

public about the importance of sustainable management of natural resources and strives to reach the less traditional student with that message.”

But whether or not students are connected to the land before they arrive in the College of Agricultural Sciences, they certainly are when they graduate, according to Fernandez. In light of upward enrollment trends in the college the past few years, he is convinced the tide has turned. “The times have allowed us to share our story in a more contemporary way because students see ‘food versus fuel’ in the headlines and repeatedly hear terms such as agroterrorism and global climate change, and they realize that this college can help prepare them to find solutions to those challenges,” he says. “In a way, this is the College of Agricultural Sciences’ time.”

Faculty and staff referenced in this article are J. Marcos Fernandez, associate dean for undergraduate education; Cyndee Graves, assistant director of university marketing and advertising in Penn State’s Department of University Marketing; Jonathan Ziegler, assistant director of marketing; Marianne Fivek, assistant to the dean for recruiting and activities; Jana Peters, undergraduate advising coordinator for the Animal Sciences major; and Jamie Murphy, coordinator of undergraduate programs in the School of Forest Resources.