

Engaging Our Youth In Agriculture – It's About More Than Being A Farmer

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When our youth hear the word “Agriculture”, what are they associating it with? Somewhere along the way – our kids have developed a mindset that to be a part of agriculture, you must be a farmer. How do we change this and convince this generation that to be a part of agriculture, you are shaping the future – with so many avenues to take along the way!

As I have mentioned in a previous column, my passion for agriculture was cultivated at a very young age. I would spend weekends on the farm with my uncle and grandparents, I was showing pigs at the Missouri State Fair with my uncle before I was 4-H age, and I was there to watch boars and gilts being photographed for our family's annual production sale catalog at the age of three. By the time I was eight years old, my mom had asked if I wanted to enroll in 4-H – as she prefaced that with being able to show pigs (on my own), she had won my heart!

I spent summers walking and washing pigs, and searching for the perfect boar to use for next year's litters. I spent fall and early winter months anticipating litters of piglets, and most of January full of late nights in the farrowing barn. February, March and April were for picking out which pigs would make the cut for county and state fair, as well as weaning, vaccinating, castrating. Growing up on the family farm meant you were a part of every learning opportunity that presented itself in a year's time.

Although I grew up in a rural community, very few of my classmates were interested in agriculture. Many of their parents were directly connected to farming – cow/calf producers, row crops, and even several with parents who owned a commercial hog barn. It completely baffled me that these classmates could be so far removed from agriculture. When asked what their future plans were, they answered with emphasis on the fact that they would not stick around our little town “just to be a farmer”.

I recently read a blog post by Amie Alexander titled *Next Generation 2018 – Engaging Youth in Agriculture: Challenging the Purpose Generation*. The post on The Chicago Council on Global Affairs website inspired me to think a little deeper about why more of our youth do not pursue education or careers in agriculture.

In her blog, Alexander states. “The world is now home to the largest youth population in history, yet the world's workforce is unprepared to provide meaningful employment to this rising generation.” She goes on to say that our growing youth population will be a contributor to continued social disruption and conflict, if they are not redirected. Alexander believes that our ability to get youth engaged in an ever evolving agricultural industry can transform up and coming youth into individuals who can shape the future of our world by impacting everything from global economic security to food security.

“It's no surprise to anyone who works in agriculture that when trying to engage young people, we are fighting a stigma about agricultural employment.” In her post, Alexander says that our instinct is to communicate to youth the reasons in which we are passionate about agriculture, about our own interests. I agree with her thoughts on this – as I see myself with an instinct to “show them from experience” exactly how agriculture can shape your life. With an “if you would just see it my way...” thought process. “It's certainly important for us to tell our stories, but it's more important to listen to the stories of others. Once we know what matters to young people, we show them the ways agriculture provides a meaningful context for advancing their passions.”, says Alexander.

Alexander talks about her involvement in youth developing programs such FFA and how they shaped her career objectives, as well as her love for agriculture. “We know increased investments into agricultural

development propel society forward. Continued funding and investment into programs that present agriculture as a meaningful career option for youth are critical. The National FFA Organization was instrumental for me to see how an agricultural career was a mechanism to grow my passion and purpose of global food security. In the ninth grade, I was competing in a speaking contest and delivering a speech on gene editing technology. Ten years later, as a result of an incredible internship opportunity with the United States Department of Agriculture, I was attending a meeting with international regulators on the same topic. These programs matter, and they deserve continued development and investment.”

And, I couldn't agree more with her! Although my passion for agriculture was cultivated on the farm – well before my school years... organizations such as 4-H, FFA and those I was involved in in college only grew my passion.

So, how do we encourage our up and coming youth to invest into an education, a career, and a passion in agriculture? Alexander believes that in order to accomplish this, we must provide what they are searching for. Today's youth are purpose driven, and as Alexander says, “the most entrepreneurial minded in history”. They are looking for ways to use their talents and passion through a meaningful economic opportunity. “To tap into this transformative talent, we don't have to convince youth to work in agriculture. We only need to help them see how agriculture is the perfect context to apply their skills and passions to advance global food security. By doing that, today's youth will empower a more a sustainable world by advancing global economic, social, political, and food security.”, says Alexander.

As stated above, information in this article is adapted from an internet blog post by Amie Alexander, titled *Next Generation 2018 – Engaging Youth in Agriculture: Challenging the Purpose Generation*. It can be found on The Chicago Council on Global Affairs website: <https://www.thechicagoCouncil.org/blog/global-foodthought/next-generation-2018-engaging-youth-agriculture-challenging-purpose>.

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