

The Seeds of Inclusion: Growing Community and Opportunity in Agriculture

By Paul F. Brown

Black students who enter Auburn University College of Agriculture share a common experience — they encounter few other students in the program who look like themselves. This is nothing new to those familiar with organizations like FFA, whose membership is only [4% Black](#). But for students accustomed to a more diverse student body, being the only minority in the room can feel alienating.

There is a long history of people of color in agriculture, yet the demographics of many university Ag programs reflect a predominantly white industry. In light of the current national dialogue about race and equity, the College of Agriculture is listening to Black students, alumni, and other professionals about the challenges and successes they've experienced, and what needs to change in order for minorities to feel welcome in the industry.

Claiming a Birthright

The reality of slavery cannot be avoided when surveying our nation's history. Yet this source of American shame presents an opportunity for discussing the Black community's agricultural heritage, said Auburn horticulture graduate ('02) Abra Lee, founder of Conquer the Soil.

"We need a gentle reminder that our community was brought here in bondage, but not because Africans had marbles in their brains," Lee said. "It was literally because they were exceptional agrarians and cultivators. When you know you're of that lineage, it's very powerful. You realize that it's your birthright to put your hands in this earth and form it, and make it what you want it to be."

Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver, both born into slavery, are just two of the exceptional agrarians who claimed that birthright and went on to revolutionize the industry. In the decades after the Civil War, millions of emancipated individuals struggled to earn a living as sharecroppers, while a small number of them owned their own farms.

An Agricultural Dynasty

In the 1870s George Bridgeforth, a formerly enslaved Tennessee native, purchased his own land in Limestone County, Alabama. He would operate a farm there with help from his wife and their nine growing children. One son, Ike, attended Tuskegee Institute; another, George Ruffin, taught there and — to Carver's chagrin — eventually headed its agriculture department.

Around 1910 the family relocated the farm to more fertile land along the Tennessee River, but lost hundreds of acres in 1934 when the Tennessee Valley Authority planned to flood the area for Wheeler Dam. The fairness of TVA's compensation is questionable. But despite the setback, the Bridgeforths retained acreage in Limestone County and continued to prosper there.

Eventually Ike's son Darden became head of the family operation and ran it with his eight sons. Incorporated in 1980, and headquartered in the Tanner community, Darden Bridgeforth & Sons has expanded into Lawrence and Madison counties, producing cotton, corn, soybeans, and wheat on one of northern Alabama's largest farms.

The family's story was told in [a 1990 University of Tennessee masters thesis](#) and in a recent [New York Times article](#).

Auburn graduate ('01) Lamont Bridgeforth, great-great-grandson of the once-enslaved George Bridgeforth, is a partner in the business. "Now it's down to Darden's last two sons — my dad Greg and my uncle Billy — with my cousin Kyle and me coming up behind them."

For more than 140 years the enterprise has survived natural threats like boll weevils, but also land confiscation and other forms of mistreatment. The Bridgeforths have fared better than most minority farmers.

The Great Migration

According to USDA [census data](#), nonwhites owned 14.8% of the country's farms back in 1920, and 12.6% in 1935 — the year US farms peaked in number at over 6.8 million. By the time the Civil Rights Act passed in 1964, the share of nonwhite farm owners had dropped to 6.3%. The [most recent](#) agriculture census reveals that nonwhites now own just 3.4% of the country's farms.

Discrimination accounts for much of the Great Migration — the gradual exodus of Blacks from southern farms and into northern urban centers. "Other people like to think that this happened because there was industry and a better livelihood up north," said Dr. Olga Bolden-Tiller, associate professor of animal science, and department head of agricultural and environmental sciences at Tuskegee University. "But in reality a lot of those Black farmers were pushed off of their

land. So they had nowhere else to go but to those areas where they could have jobs and make a life for themselves.”

As reported in [The Counter](#), the USDA has come under litigation in recent decades and admitted that its own discriminatory practices contributed to the dramatic decline of Black farm ownership. Accusations of unfair fund distribution persist to this day.

“Because of these negative connotations in the industry, minorities have shied away from careers in agriculture and farming,” Dr. Bolden-Tiller said.

Continuing Challenges

After 30 years as a commercial horticulture agent with Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES), James Miles knows the obstacles that minority farmers face. He was responsible for sharing research-based solutions with growers throughout southeast Alabama who could not attend college or industry conferences.

On one level, Miles said, all of these farmers have the same worries. “Labor, land value, urban sprawl, industry regulations — it doesn’t matter who you are, you’re going to face those challenges in the agriculture industry.” On another level he knows that larger, mainstream growers have resources that smaller businesses, including many minority-owned farms, have trouble accessing. “Some growers can’t take time off to attend industry conferences,” he said. “Some don’t know how to set up heir properties, and they might lose land because of it.”

Some minority farmers also view any kind of government assistance programs, including ACES, with skepticism. “One challenge I faced as an extension agent was a lack of trust of resource avenues, such as the USDA and extension systems,” said Miles, who is Black. “Some of it is historic, where they felt left out and alienated because they didn’t have the same financial or political clout as other growers. Some of it is historic because of race.”

Lamont Bridgeforth said that his family likely had an easier time getting loans because people in the region knew and respected Darden. “My granddad’s reputation probably put us in a different place, where if we couldn’t get money over here, we could still find money to keep us going,” he said.

The family has not always gotten fair deals. At some point Bridgeforth learned that other local growers were being charged less for seed and other supplies. “I started to realize that some vendors were treating our farm differently. I figured it was because we were Black,” he said. But Bridgeforth adds that he has never experienced racism directly the way his dad and uncle have.

“Some like to say it’s the white man against the Black man, and that’s not necessarily true,” he said. “We have white men in this area who want to see us succeed. They give us the same opportunities they’d give any other farmer.”

The Only One in the Room

When Bridgeforth was 18 and planning for college, his grandfather told him, “If you want to farm, go to Auburn University.” After one year attending an HBCU, Bridgeforth transferred to Auburn as an Ag major. At the time the College of Agriculture had a couple of Black graduate students, but Bridgeforth was the only Black undergraduate in his class. He said the situation didn’t intimidate him, but that he did recognize it. Later, after switching his major to business administration, he learned that affirmative action had been a major factor in his admittance to Auburn. “When I applied, the university was being pressured by the federal government to be more diverse,” Bridgeforth said. “So that’s why I was accepted—because I was a Black applicant.”

Abra Lee, an Atlanta native, experienced culture shock as an incoming horticulture student. “It was one of the first times in my life in a long time that I had been the only Black person in the room,” she said. “I remember hearing classmates from little towns say they literally didn’t know any Black people back home. I was shocked by that, but it was a reality for them.” Although Lee never felt mistreated by her classmates, and was befriended by some, she always felt like an outsider, like she wasn’t a member of the club. Her well-meaning professors couldn’t relate to her either. “Sometimes they just didn’t know what to say or do. At the College of Agriculture, I always felt othered, whether it was imagined or real — probably a bit of both.”

Lee became depressed, and despite her love of horticulture she began failing her classes. “I was put on academic suspension for six months,” she said. “But after my parents gave me a great pep talk, I returned and was an amazing student. And once I stopped trying to assimilate and be like everybody else, I started to be accepted.”

Terrance Crayton, currently a junior agriscience education major, definitely noticed a change from community college to Auburn. “I feel a little outnumbered here,” Crayton said. “In the College of Agriculture there are a couple of students that are my race, but in my major I’m the only African American student in Ag Ed.” He said the demographics were similar in FFA, but that it doesn’t bother him. “It doesn’t necessarily affect my success rate. If anything it motivates me, because I feel like I’m setting a path for everybody that comes behind me.”

Crayton serves as an Ag Ambassador for both the college and specifically for Ag Ed. “I feel I’ve been given the same opportunities, if not more, than other Ag students in my class,” he said. Despite being underrepresented at Auburn, Crayton is thriving there, thanks in large part to his community involvement.

Finding a Community

Dr. Bolden-Tiller understands minority students who feel outnumbered at predominately white institutions. Although she teaches at an HBCU and attended one as an undergraduate, she earned her doctorate from a university where she was the only Black PhD student in animal sciences. But she flourished there once she joined the campus chapter of [MANNRS](#) — Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences.

“I had been a member of MANNRS as an undergraduate and felt comfortable in that community and having a voice,” said Dr. Bolden-Tiller, the new president of MANNRS as of May 1, 2021. The organization provided her a local community and a professional network beyond the campus. “I think identifying community in a place where you feel there is no community is important, and sometimes that means going outside your program and department. For example, Auburn has MANNRS, but it’s housed in the College of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences, not in Agriculture.”

Incoming students may not know where to look for community, especially if they are outside the department. Faculty advisors need to develop rapport with their students and point them toward those connection opportunities.

Discovering support and community within the industry is equally important. One example is the [National Black Growers Council](#), which connects Black farmers from around the country, including the Bridgefords, to ensure they have a voice and the information they need to succeed.

“Additionally we need successful farmers to mentor the younger growers on a regional level,” James Miles said. “While national networks are good, what you glean from one farmer doesn’t necessarily translate if you’re in a different geographical area.”

Representation Matters

Bridgeforth, Lee, and Crayton each had family members and others who encouraged their pursuits and stood as visual reminders of what’s possible in the industry. Lee recalls how empowering it was when, during an interview for an arborist position in Atlanta, she saw several Black arborists working nearby. “I sat there thinking, ‘Oh, my people! Heck yeah, I can do this!’” She also knows from experience that advancement often depends on your representation. “To this day, I have never earned a leadership position where a Black person wasn’t on the other side of the table,” Lee said.

Crayton believes the industry must diversify in order to keep up with demand. “The world population is going from 7 billion to almost 10 billion by 2050, and by then the average American will be three generations removed from the farm,” he

said. “We need to create opportunities for anybody who wants to be in agriculture.” While minorities often steer clear of predominantly white industries, Crayton sees it as a personal challenge. “Somebody’s got to pioneer it, and I say be yourself, step up to the plate, and take on the challenge.” He is doing just that.

While serving as an FFA state officer for a year prior to Auburn, Crayton spoke with high school students from all over Alabama, and even states like Georgia, Tennessee, and Delaware. He still gets messages from some of those students saying how much it encouraged them to see another person of color in a leadership role.

Cultivating Change at Auburn

How do we make the College of Agriculture a place where students find community, where they see themselves represented, and where no one feels alone in the room? Since last year a task force, headed by Codi Plaster and Nate Hardy, has been looking at several solutions — like better recruitment, especially in schools with less exposure to agriculture; creating a staff position focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion; providing diversity training for faculty and staff; and reviewing and updating policies.

“We want to make sure that we’re offering the best support, programming, and that we’re being responsive to the needs of students, faculty, and staff,” said Amy Brock, director of advising, and a task force supervisor. “The best thing we can do is provide a safe, inviting atmosphere that is just and equitable, where all of our students feel like they matter.”