



Developing and Nurturing Leaders of Tomorrow: the Role of Universities



One of our most important responsibilities as leaders of agricultural universities, and a critical role for RUFORUM as well, is to reflect critically on the mission of the university. Taxpayers who fund budgets, policy makers who determine the resources available, producers both large and small, consumers and other stakeholders, harbor multiple expectations of universities work and role. The goal of educating professionals, engaging in research, and reaching out to the “community” define the mission of most universities. I would argue that while all three goals are worthy and should, resources allowing, be pursued, most of our institutions would be well-served making the first of these - preparing young people as contributing members of society - the first among equals.



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The challenges confronting the world, chief among them climate change and its myriad effects on the environment, the economy and our very survival as a species, demand new ways of thinking and acting. The search for scientific and technical solutions is critically important, as are efforts to support producers and rural communities in managing a changing environment. However, preparing the next generation of professionals as leaders in business, science, government and civil society remains the most fundamental of our responsibilities. Because of budget constraints, tradition and the lack of a clear vision of the task of preparing the next

generation of leaders, the emphasis in many educational programs is limited to simply imparting knowledge. If future leaders, in Africa and elsewhere, are going to do a better job of stewarding our societies towards a more sustainable future, they need far more. Training in leadership, critical thinking, ethics and citizenship should all be high on the list of priorities we establish in our learning models.

I retired from EARTH University (www.earth.ac.cr) in Costa Rica two years ago. During my career, I had the good fortune of being both a teacher and an administrator, including academic Dean and Provost. EARTH's mission is to "Prepare leaders with ethical values to contribute to sustainable development and to construct a prosperous and just society". Note that while EARTH's program centers on agricultural education, the mission statement itself does not mention agriculture, it focuses instead on the formation of leaders - leaders with ethical values. At EARTH, the focus on students, leadership and ethics determines how the program is organized, the criteria used in the selection of students, the profile of academic staff, even the design of facilities.

"Studying at a University like EARTH where many people contribute innovative ideas to solve agricultural problems gives us a grand vision of the world situation! However, when you combine that with the focus on multiculturalism, social responsibility and human development, it opens your mind to think of agriculture as more than an economic activity, rather as an integral activity that unites technical knowledge with the experience of producers and their values, providing food and environmental services at the disposition of society."

-4th year EARTH student

Over the past 18 years, I have also had the opportunity to collaborate closely with RUFORUM. This collaboration centered around sharing the experiences of EARTH University in developing and modeling a student-centered and experiential learning model, as well as learning about the many lessons being learned by RUFORUM universities as they incorporate innovative programs in their agricultural programs. Many faculty members I have met, particularly younger

professors and lecturers across the RUFORUM network, want to go beyond lecturing and generating research to engage more fully in critical dialogue with students and in creating opportunities for undergraduate students to collaborate in research and community outreach activities. Often, however, faculty promotion structures reward publication history far more than other endeavors and scarce resources limit the possibility for students and faculty to get out in the field, to interact with producers and community members, to experiment with entrepreneurship, etc. Creating an environment in which students are actively engaged in the classroom, in the lab and in the field requires skills and commitment on the part of teachers that go way beyond technical competence.

In Africa, and elsewhere, a disproportionate percentage of students in the university come from urban and relatively higher income families. These students have the advantage of having studied in more highly resourced primary and secondary schools, have parents who themselves may be university graduates, and have family resources that can contribute to the cost of a university education. On the other hand, young people from rural areas typically enjoy few of these advantages. Yet in many cases, it is these students who, having grown up on small farms and having worked in agriculture, are better prepared to pursue a degree in agriculture. Unfortunately, the lack of resources for financing a university education and admissions criteria that reward scores on standardized exams more than personal characteristics often present unsurmountable obstacles.

EARTH was founded with the express purpose of providing world-class education in agricultural science for highly motivated young people, largely from rural areas. Admission is based on a multitude of factors including past academic performance, but even more on less tangible characteristics like leadership potential, values and vocation for a career in agriculture. RUFORUM's TAGDev's project at Egerton and Gulu universities has pioneered the utilization of many of these same characteristics in admissions decisions with very encouraging results.

As we reflect on our mission, I would hope that we keep our responsibility for preparing the next generation of leaders front, center, that we prioritize the provision of opportunities for our students to develop their ethics and leadership capacity and that we promote innovations in teaching and learning. I also hope that we might reflect on the profile of the students we admit, and consider criteria beyond the applicant's ability to score high on an admissions exam. There is no higher calling than forming the leaders of tomorrow and it is certainly worth our time and energy to reflect critically on the job we are doing.

About the Author

Dr. Daniel Sherrard was Provost at EARTH University, Costa Rica. He was the University's Chief Academic Officer, where he led the institution's strategic planning process. He was the Academic Dean at EARTH University. Prior to this, he held numerous academic positions in the same institution. He is currently actively engaged with colleagues from African universities in efforts to incorporate entrepreneurial and experiential education in their curricula. He is the author of publications related to agricultural higher education such as, "The Change Agenda: A New Approach to Higher Education in Agriculture", "The University-Community Alliance for Sustainability", and "The Need for a New Focus in Agricultural Higher Education in Latin America", among others. He holds Master's in International Agricultural Development from Cal Poly State University, and his Doctorate in Agricultural Education was from Iowa State University in the United States.

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