



REPRESENTATION OF SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED GROUPS IN AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES

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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines a socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher as “a farmer or rancher who has been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudices because of their identity as a member of a group without regard to their individual qualities” (USDA, 2010).

According to Rural Development (2013), there are 126 agricultural cooperatives registered in Texas. Of these, two cooperatives were selected from each region, but only 12 out of the 14 selected cooperatives had websites and provided the primary data for this study. Most of the cooperatives analyzed handled cotton and grain.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The USDA definition of socially disadvantaged groups include African Americans, American Indians or Alaskan natives, Hispanics, Asians or Pacific Islanders and women.

This study’s diversity indicators consisted of visual images of whites and ethnic or racial minorities including Hispanics, and African Americans with both male and female representation.

Information was collected using the researchers’ best judgment when surveying the names, pictures, websites and promotional materials.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative method analyzing the content collected from social media of agricultural cooperatives in the state of Texas was used to determine the level of inclusion of socially disadvantaged groups in boards of directors, managers, and events.

Each cooperative’s website and/or its Facebook page and/or photographs were viewed to determine the presence, if any, of ethnic minorities or women on the board of directors or in management positions.

The cooperatives studied ranged from farm supply co-ops, to pecan marketers, to cotton gins and beef producer associations.

OBJECTIVES

To determine the level of representation of socially disadvantaged producers in online media, social media, and print materials associated with agricultural cooperatives.

To assess the type of media that cooperatives are using to include socially disadvantaged groups.

RESULTS

- The study revealed a lack of utilization of websites by cooperatives.
- The overall trend was white male with the occasional female as a manager.
 - 100% of all board of directors analyzed were white and 98% were male.
 - There was more gender diversity in managerial positions with 25% being female.
- These findings show a lack of inclusion of socially disadvantaged individuals, especially representation of ethnic and racial minorities or women in the leadership positions exhibited through membership on boards of directors.
- Furthermore, only two cooperatives displayed diversity of employees and event attendees through their photographs.
- Only one cooperative had an active Facebook account and frequently posted updates or event information.

CONCLUSIONS

The research revealed a lack of diversity among directors and managers in the selected registered agricultural cooperatives in Texas.

Perhaps the lack of diversity is to a certain degree due to the nature of cooperatives; since they are member owned and organized, they tend to be less diversified than privately and publicly owned organizations.

The results are only representative of those agricultural cooperatives included in the study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Agricultural cooperatives strive to meet the needs of their members, which include socially disadvantaged farmers, such as ethnic and racial minorities and women.

Agricultural cooperatives should increase their efforts to be more inclusive of socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers through marketing, word of mouth, public involvement, and utilizing current technology.

Agricultural cooperatives are also encouraged to maintain a website and disseminate more information about their socially disadvantaged members through such websites.

The results also indicate there is potential for professional development regarding the use of social media to promote the work of agricultural cooperatives and expand their potential to serve their members and the communities.

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