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Fresno State Seeks to Expand Diversity in California Agriculture

Farm Credit has given \$700,000 to help fund school's Multicultural Ambassador Program

The Central Valley of California is the largest producer of agricultural commodities in the nation, and agriculture is by far the largest segment of the region's economy. But as Dr. Sharon Freeman, an assistant professor at California State University Fresno puts it, the state's changing demographics mean agriculture has to change as well.

"To remain competitive, we need to encourage Latinos and other underrepresented students to continue their education through our hands-on learning programs and to become future leaders for the agricultural industry in California," she said.

Freeman is the program coordinator for the Jordan College of Agricultural Science and Technology's Ag Ambassadors Program, which began some 40 years ago to promote Fresno State, the Jordan College and higher education in general. But she pays special attention to the Farm Credit Multicultural Ambassadors – five undergraduate students majoring in one of the college's six departments who are recruited to reach out to Latino and other underrepresented populations.

The team visits urban and rural high schools and community colleges in the Central Valley and along the Central Coast to advise prospective students about the opportunities at Fresno State and to serve as role models to motivate and encourage these students to acquire the needed skills and courses to enroll. Taking advantage of technology, the program even had a virtual session with students in Carpinteria in southern Santa Barbara County.

"The Multicultural Ambassador Program provides recruitment activities, career fairs, farm tours, and educational days to help ensure that underrepresented students become aware of careers in agriculture and the opportunities at Fresno State," Freeman said. In the 2021-22 school year, the program organized some 50 outreach events throughout the region, which reached 620 high school and community college students.

The program was established by four members of the Farm Credit System – AgWest Farm Credit, American AgCredit, CoBank, and Fresno Madera Farm Credit. Since the program's inception in 2013, they, along with Golden State Farm Credit, have donated \$701,000 to support the program. The organizations are part of the nationwide Farm Credit System – the largest provider of credit to U.S. agriculture.

Keith Hesterberg, President and CEO of Fresno Madera Farm Credit, said supporting diversity and equity in agriculture is a must.

"Fresno State's Jordan College provides agricultural programs that are preparing the next generation of agriculturalists," Hesterberg said. "Ensuring that these programs are accessible to all students who want to attend college and better prepare themselves for employment in the agriculture industry is crucial to the future of California agriculture, and Farm Credit is proud to have taken a leadership role in this effort."

Current Fresno State students say participating in the program's activities while still in high school made a profound impact on them.

"It was eye-opening," recalled Abelino Garza II, a freshman from Bakersfield majoring in biochemistry who is serving on the FFA Field Day Committee. "We'd take the tours of the farm laboratories and animal units and then have time to walk around the campus, which gave me a chance to see what this campus had to offer. I could see that this was an agricultural college and that there was an opportunity to pursue a career in many ways."

But besides helping increase awareness of the university and about career opportunities in agriculture, the ambassadors also gain skills that will help them toward a more successful future because the ambassadors organize and lead the presentations.

"When I was a freshman, it was intimidating to give the farm tours and provide information about the campus," said Jocelyne Juarez, a graduate student from Wasco, 25 miles northwest of Bakersfield who is an advisor to the underclassmen. "Being part of the program has created comfort in speaking in front of people. And it's gone from me doing the presentations to me helping the student give their presentations. Being in the program really helps develop soft skills."



Jocelyne Juarez and Stacy Vanscoy lead session at Independence High School.

Ivan Trujillo, a senior from Greenfield, 30 miles south of Salinas, agreed.



Ivan Trujillo (center) with sister Desiree and Daniel Villasenor from Greenfield High School.

"Just by getting involved I was able to develop so many skills I didn't know I had," said Trujillo who – like Juarez – plans to become an ag teacher. "I didn't know that I had great organizational skills and could plan conferences and organize events – things you'd never imagine doing in college. I have one more year here and I want to make the most of it."

Freeman said the program has been expanding. Last year, she said they hosted the first Multicultural Ambassador Presentation Day, which brings classes of students in for a half-day of events and learning opportunities. One of the programs promoted there is the Agricultural Career Readiness Skills Certificate Pathway for the 21st Century, which allows high school students to earn a transferable certificate to demonstrate they have participated in soft skills development through their FFA program.

Fresno State last year also hosted the statewide Agricultural Ambassador Conference, which brought in 120 community college and university students from around the state to further develop personal skills and provide networking opportunities. Students from five agricultural colleges work together to put the

conference together, which includes industry representatives from Farm Credit, the Tulare County Farm Bureau, Taylor Farms, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the California Department of Agriculture. This year's conference will be held January 28-30 at Fresno State.

Then in May, the program will hold a new Aspire to Grow Conference, which will target local students from underrepresented communities to hear speakers talk about diversity and inclusion and the need for the students to pursue future education.

She noted that Farm Credit also supports the annual FFA Field Day at Fresno State, which is scheduled for April 22. The event regularly attracts between 2,000 and 2,500 high school students from around the San Joaquin Valley.

Mark Littlefield, President and CEO of AgWest Farm Credit, said Farm Credit was extremely pleased to see how the program is continuing to grow and reach increasing numbers of underrepresented students.

"Farming feeds the world, but unfortunately there are many people who aren't aware of all the careers available in agriculture – in animal and plant science, engineering and technology, along with developing better ways to grow the food the nation and the world depend on," Littlefield said. "The Ambassadors Program has provided thousands of students with that information over the years, and Farm Credit looks forward to working with Fresno State to grow this great program even further."

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About Farm Credit:

AgWest Farm Credit, American AgCredit, CoBank, and Fresno Madera Farm Credit are cooperatively owned lending institutions providing agriculture and rural communities with a dependable source of credit. For more than 100 years, the Farm Credit System has specialized in financing farmers, ranchers, farmer-owned cooperatives, rural utilities and agribusinesses. Farm Credit offers a broad range of loan products and financial services, including long-term real estate loans, operating lines of credit, equipment and facility loans, cash management and appraisal and leasing services...everything a "growing" business needs. For more information, visit www.farmcreditalliance.com

About the Multicultural Ambassadors Program:

The Multicultural Ambassadors program is made up of agricultural students attending California State University, Fresno. Their mission is to conduct recruitment activities to encourage underrepresented students to further their education, consider agricultural careers, and to learn about the opportunities available at the Jordan College of Agricultural Sciences and Technology. Recruitment activities include career fairs, high school presentations, farm tours, and leadership conferences. Through participation in these recruitment activities, the Multicultural Ambassadors develop soft skills, leadership, and career-readiness practices that prepare them for leadership positions in the agricultural industry.