



## History of Agriculture Course for Colleges of Agriculture

### Introduction

The importance of and need for a comprehensive understanding of agriculture has grown in Colleges of Agriculture. A comprehensive understanding view of agriculture includes the technical and deep content of specific agricultural fields as well as a broad education focused on interdisciplinary agriculture issues. One strategy for helping university students developing a broad and interdisciplinary understanding of agriculture would be to offer a History of Agriculture in the United States course as part of their program of study. We have taught this course at The University of Tennessee at Martin and Colorado State University for over three years. These courses fulfill requirements in students' programs of studies (humanity and history course requirements). Students have also responded very favorable to these courses during each offering and the courses regularly go over capacity. We argue there is great value in a History of Agriculture in the United States course for all Colleges of Agriculture.

### Procedure for Designing the Course

Colorado State University initially developed the course during a one-year period, and it has been taught five times. The faculty at University of Tennessee at Martin worked with Colorado State University faculty in developing key elements in a nearly identical History of Agriculture in the United States course, and it has been taught six times. The course had to gain approval from both university curriculum committees. Colorado State University has recently developed an online version of the course, that will be offered in the Summer of 2020. The University of Tennessee at Martin course has been taught both online and face to face multiple times. The following paragraphs outline the most unique features of this course at both universities: content and assignments.

### *Course Content*

The content of the course focused on both key movements and events in agriculture as well as important philosophical and social influences in agriculture. First, the course included content focusing on the historical introduction of different techniques and key milestones of agriculture in the United States. The time period included pre-Columbian agriculture through events in the 1980's related to agriculture in the United States. Course topics would include the key legislation related to agriculture, historical persons, events, and technological developments; efforts have been made to teach these facts as well as how these events have impacted agriculture in the modern world.

Second, the course included content that centered on agrarian ideas (ideologies) throughout agriculture history in the United States. These included Jefferson agrarianism (late 1780-1850s), romantic agrarianism (1830-1860s), southern agrarianism (1930-1940s), neo- agrarianism (1970s-now), and agrarian populism (2000s-now). The course connected how past events are linked to the agrarian ideas of the era and how these ideas shaped the future of agriculture. Finally, the inclusion of agrarian ideas allowed for critical discussions about the role of diversity in agricultural. These discussions include the history of forced removal of indigenous peoples from their land, role of agriculture in the enslavement of Africans, as well as the limited roles women had historically in agriculture.

The course had two textbooks (Danbom, 1995; Hurt, 2002). The University of Tennessee at Martin faculty also included a day long agriculture history field trip in which students experienced nearby historically significant persons, locations, and artifacts.

### *Assessments*

The other unique feature of this course was the assignments. In particular, the unique assignment for both institutions were an ongoing (semester long) “hands on” history project. Traditional history courses require end of the year historical research project. This appeals to some students. However, the designers of the course recognized that other students wanted a chance to engage in historical research in different ways. The course allowed students to choose from four different final project types:

1. Traditional historical research paper (at least 13-page paper)  
Example: The impact of the green revolution on farm sizes
2. Media Projects (Complete video, audio, print project with at least 4-page reflection paper)  
Example: Visual history of real cowgirls
3. Oral history project (Interview transcripts and at least 9-page paper)  
Example: Remembering when horses still ruled: A retired farmer interviewed
4. Historical restoration project (Work with restoration group and at least 3-page reflection)  
Example: Rebuilding the historic Joplin grain elevator

### **Reflections on the Course to Date**

The students of the courses were very favorable of their experience. The ratings for the course at Colorado State University were high, ranging between 4.42 and 4.84 (out of 5.00) for instructor and course ratings for the offerings. The ratings for the course at the University of Tennessee at Martin were similar, ranging between 4.22 and 4.87 (out of 5.00) for instructor and course ratings for the offerings.

Qualitative student feedback from both universities were generally positive as well. Students who completed the course described the course as “engaging to make the topics interesting” and “learning about the history of agriculture and how it has evolved over time.” Students also found the experiential nature of assignments as appealing, describing the course as an opportunity to “experience the topics” as opposed to just hearing about them. Many of the students also appreciated the uniqueness of the final project which allowed them to do something more than just a traditional history research project. Some negative comments were also received from student completers. Some students described the scope and length of assignments as being “too much” or “too long” for a three-hour undergraduate course.

**References:**

Danbom, D. B. (1995). *Born in the country: A history of rural America*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Hurt, R. D. (2002). *American agriculture: A brief history*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press.

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