Abstract
This narrative study compared the experiences of students from nonconventional agriculture majors (organic and horticulture programs) in a College of Agriculture. The students we interviewed expressed, at some level, a feeling of disconnection from students and faculty who had more conventional agricultural values within their program, department, or college. The students had varying degrees of frustration. Some students left their program, department, or college because of these issues. The findings shed light on how differing agricultural values can create tensions between students and faculty.

Introduction
For many colleges of agriculture, their student diversity increased over the past 50 years. Students have diversity in race, ethnicity, and gender as well as different perceptions of agricultural values. Colleges of agriculture in land-grant institutions may not openly view perceptions of agriculture as a diversity issue for the college. However, agricultural values, also termed agricultural ideologies, dictate how students and faculty conceptualize agriculture (Martin, 2016a). Researchers have identified some of these tensions and differences at the secondary education and college levels (Martin, 2014; Martin and Kitchel, 2013). Many of these changes originate from the changing population trends in the United States and the polarization of people within our society. The diversification of the student body has created unique challenges. The influx of students and faculty members with nonconventional agricultural values into this college with a strong student body and faculty members with conventional agriculture values had led to tension due to the assumed stance of both sets of values. This study explored the experiences of students from nonconventional agriculture programs who are enrolled in classes and participating in programming in a college of agriculture.

The issues surrounding the diversification of students in a college of agriculture relate to the larger issues surrounding agricultural values. This study was informed by two opposing viewpoints about agriculture: conventional and nonconventional (Martin, 2016b). Generally speaking, conventional agriculturalists are those people who advocate for agricultural practices which are focused on the greatest efficiency. Their arguments are often more pragmatic than philosophical. Conventional agriculturalists draw upon the great successes of scientific agriculture (i.e., increased production, more nutritious and hardy crop varieties, and the economic vitality of a family business, etc.) as the central arguments for their values. Scientific developments in agriculture and continued scientific breakthroughs are viewed as necessary if agriculturalists are going to feed the world at the end of the 21st century. These practical arguments often become a call for action for the conventional agriculturalists to protect and advance these practices (Conway, 2012; Murphy, 2007).

Non-conventionalists, as defined, would prescribe to new, alternative, and typically smaller scale farms and ranch production practices and hold values that are associated with this type of production. The nonconventional agriculturalists’ values of agriculture have both philosophical and pragmatic overtones. They generally argue for systems of agriculture which balances environmental sustainability, social justice, and food production. The rapid development of agriculture over the last 100 years has created ecological and social issues according to this viewpoint (Berry, 1977; Thompson, 2010). They cite a myriad of ecological and social issues (e.g., America’s collapsing rural communities, the negative consequences of chemical agriculture, etc.) as the basis for their viewpoints. These differing viewpoints and values have provided a framework for this study as we examined the experiences of non-conventional agriculture majors in a college of agriculture science.

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of non-conventional agriculture majors in their College of Agriculture programs. The study was guided by three research questions, including:

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Experiences of Non-Conventional

1. What do you think are the values of the college of agriculture?
2. Do you think your values align to the culture you see in the college of agriculture?
3. Would you say that you belong to a community of students in the college of agriculture?

Methods

This study is a narrative examination of undergraduates who shared their lived experiences in a college of agricultural science. Narrative research can provide unique insights into the experiences of students. We gathered in-depth explanations on topics important to both the interviewer and interviewee (Creswell, 2012). This was important to this study because the interviewers were exploring if the interviewed students believed they felt a cultural connection to the agricultural values of the college of agriculture. The narrative approach allowed students to identify issues important to them and enabled the interviewers to explore these issues in detail during the interview. The Colorado State University Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol and all participants provided written informed consent prior to participation in the study.

The population for this study were undergraduates in the organic agriculture and horticulture programs. The college of agriculture in this study contained five departments which housed various programs covering a wide range of agricultural majors. We recruited from organic agriculture and horticulture programs because previous research suggested that these students might feel disconnected from the agricultural values of the rest of the college. We solicited students to participate in the study through emails to upperclassman in the horticulture program, attending the horticulture club (undergraduate student organization), and visiting classes (organic agriculture). We accepted and interviewed any student that volunteered for the study. Students received no compensation for participation in this study. This recruitment process led to 80 students being recruited for this study. In the end, we had six students volunteered for the study: three of these students were in the organic agriculture program and three were in the horticulture program. Four of the students were female and two were males. All students were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

As project leaders, our backgrounds as interviewers and researchers were important in this study. One of us is a faculty member and has extensive experience in qualitative research and working with different types of agriculture students. This work includes researching populations which would be considered nonconventional. The faculty member was a former agriculture teacher and has a PhD in agricultural education. The second team included an undergraduate researcher, majoring in agricultural education and business, with a variety of lived experiences working with students who would identify themselves as nonconventional agriculturalists.

The interviews were conducted in the faculty member’s office using prescribed list of questions. The focus of these questions centered on the interviewees experiences in their classes, program, and college in relation to how they and others perceive the culture of agriculture. Students were asked to articulate what they value about agriculture and if they see those values represented in their classes, programs, or college. They were then asked probing questions and to state examples of how their agricultural values have been reaffirmed or rejected.

We utilized constant comparative methods during data analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Constant comparative analysis requires the researchers to develop themes from the interviewee’s words (constructivist epistemology) rather than from a pre-existing theoretical framework (post-positivist epistemology) chosen by the research team. This method was significant because it required multiple rounds of data analysis. We conducted four rounds which transformed the data into robust themes. These four rounds transformed the data from codes in the first round (open coding), to categories in the second round (axial coding), to refined themes in the third round (axial coding), and refined themes in the final round (axial coding). We met at the end of each round to discuss our findings and reach consensus about the codes, categories, and then themes. We did not immediately reach consensus on the themes during the third round, thus we read through the data again to refine the themes we proposed in round three. A consensus was reached on the themes after the fourth round of data analysis. The work of these rounds was conducted by us.

Results

The findings section has been divided into two sections based on the two themes: information on students feeling isolated with the college of agriculture and information on the culture of the faculty.

Themes 1: Students Feeling Isolated Within the College of Agriculture

The college of agriculture offers many majors that vary from agricultural economics to animal science to horticulture. The majors are offered within a handful of different disciplines within the departments. Students spend significant amounts of time in the department of their major/minor. In this case, horticulture majors belong in the horticulture department while the organic agriculture program is housed in the soil and crops department. Considering that people (faculty, staff, and fellow students) seemingly share the same interests in departments, students feel less connected to the agricultural values represented in other departments within the college of agriculture. Susan, a horticulture major and self-described nonconventional agriculturalist stated, “When people get into a mindset, it doesn’t matter if you’re in [the] horticulture [program], or if you’re
Abby was specifically interested in what she was doing. There were more people that shared the same opinions [I had]. In all my horticulture classes, I feel like it’s a lot more of what I want to do, because with the agriculture education classes the kids are just very different. They are not, a lot of them, open to what I want to do.

The fact that some students identify themselves only with students who share majors rather than the entire college of agriculture reiterated the issue of isolation.

**Theme 2: Culture of the Faculty**

The culture within faculty has a strong influence on student ability and willingness to get involved in activities beyond the college classroom. Tina, an organic agriculture student identified the significant cultural differences that impacted her college experience as more between faculty and students rather than between students in different departments. “When I say ‘we’ I mean specifically the College of Ag and I think more of the faculty and staff rather than students.” The students we interviewed provided examples of how the culture of some faculty in the College of Agricultural differed from them. Abby identified what she considered to be a cultural knowledge gap that impacted her in a particular class. “It was very hard to come into the ag college without any background because teachers expected you to already know [conventional agriculture] things if you were in an ag class.”

The divide between faculty and the students interviewed centered mainly on their views of agricultural values. Abby reported, “I feel like the strict ag classes I’ve taken, like ag issues, those have been very biased towards conservative [conventional] sides.” Faculty who aren’t willing to adapt to the nonconventional agriculture ideas are hindering education of some of the students interviewed. Tina related, “There are some professors and faculty and staff that will never change [from conventional agriculture]. That’s just how they’ve grown up and they are comfortable with the system. They know that’s ‘the right system,’ and they’re not going to change.” Faculty who struggle to find a middle ground on agricultural values could cause students to change majors. Tina was one of those students. Her frustration is expressed as follows: “I actually almost left the College of Ag and went to Natural Resources [College]. I had talked to a couple of advisors saying what I was interested in and it was focused on sustainability and organic ag. They basically told me that the College of Ag wasn’t really a place for me for what I had in mind.” Tina was not the only student who changed majors because of the perceived disconnection with faculty as Abby had changed majors as well. The stories from these students highlight some of the agricultural values issues between students and faculty that had led to some people leaving their program, department, and/or college.
The horticulture and organic agriculture students we interviewed expressed, at some level, a feeling of disconnection from students and faculty in the college of agriculture. The disconnection usually happened at the program and/or department level though. The students’ experiences at the college were harder to discern because those experiences were either too few or intermingled with experiences in their program and/or department. The students had varying degrees of frustration, ranging from slightly frustrated, yet, still making the best of their situation to very frustrated and deciding to switch programs. Furthermore, some of the students were very happy with the change they had made in their program of studies because of whatever issue existed. There was a very real human element to this phenomenon that could not be overlooked. In other words, sometimes a change was necessary; however, we would argue that students feeling cultural tension and isolation are not good for any program, department, or college. We must acknowledge that our findings cannot generalize to all horticulture and organic agriculture students in this college of agriculture; however, the findings offer glimpses into possible cultural issues, which may be present.

The foundation for any stable educational institution is the relationship among students and faculty. This research revealed that some students experienced cultural disconnections when interacting with students and faculty within the college of agriculture. This lack of community for these students was potentially detrimental to them because it could indicate that they lack a supportive educational community. Some of the interviewees spoke about how they thought about leaving their major or had already switched their major. Sometimes students leaving or switching programs is beneficial as they really do academically belong in a different major, department, or college. However, when the switch out of a program is because of a cultural issue, then not only has the student been negatively impacted; the program, department, and/or college suffers as well because that student’s departure was possibly an unnecessary brain drain and cultural migration. Diverse student populations (which can include agricultural practices as well as ethnicity, race, gender, etc.) elevate a program, department, or college because they bring in new ideas. We interviewed expressed, at some level, a feeling of disconnection from students and faculty in the college of agriculture. The disconnection usually happened at the program and/or department level though. The students had varying degrees of frustration, ranging from slightly frustrated, yet, still making the best of their situation to very frustrated and deciding to switch programs. Furthermore, some of the students were very happy with the change they had made in their program of studies because of whatever issue existed. There was a very real human element to this phenomenon that could not be overlooked. In other words, sometimes a change was necessary; however, we would argue that students feeling cultural tension and isolation are not good for any program, department, or college. We must acknowledge that our findings cannot generalize to all horticulture and organic agriculture students in this college of agriculture; however, the findings offer glimpses into possible cultural issues, which may be present.

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The students we interviewed had a desire to be part of a community. A community of learners requires dialogue between faculty and students alike which advocates and educates one another with respect, regardless of backgrounds or future intentions. An academic community of diverse ideas and open communication between students and faculty can improve the quality of work for both faculty and student populations. The findings of this study reaffirm the power of divergent agricultural values within institutions of agricultural education (Martin, 2016a, 2016b). This study also sheds light on how differing agricultural values can create strong tensions between people (Brewster, 2012). This has not been a popular area of study. We recommend that faculty and leaders within all colleges of agriculture work to develop a more inclusive culture for all students.

We recognize that every program, department and college has cultural norms which are important to groups. We understand that culturally overhauling an academic entity is very difficult and not feasible in the short run. Nonetheless, some of these issues can be alleviated with more training and open dialogue between students and faculty. There are numerous recommendations which can help ease the cultural issues faced by students and faculty alike. First, programs and departments need to be cognizant of the differing agricultural values of students in their department and have opportunities for those students. These opportunities can be quite broad, including course(s), clubs, organizations, or faculty who actively advocate for various issues. We are not advocating for wholesale changes (culturally or programmatically) of any department. We are arguing for programs and departments to be responsive to the needs of their students.

The preceding recommendation means that programs and departments must understand the agricultural values of their students and faculty. Thus, we recommend that these entities conduct a basic survey of their students and faculty to explore which values emerge. We would propose that some programs and departments have a dominant agricultural value which may be over emphasized in coursework and programming. If an entity seems to have an over emphasized agricultural value, then training may be necessary to help develop the capacity to address differing values. We must find ways to develop more cultural connections between faculty and students as agriculture continues to diversify and broaden.

This study highlights the diversity of agricultural values within colleges of agriculture. When there are tensions between students and/or faculty surrounding agricultural values, students can feel disconnected to the culture of the program, department, or college. This tension can lead to not completely becoming part of the learning community or even changing majors. Faculty and staff at colleges of agriculture need to be aware of the power and influence of agricultural values within their students and faculty. How we think, discuss, and work across agricultural values within the institutions of a college of agriculture shapes the depth of knowledge we create about agriculture.

**Literature Cited**


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