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Teaching about Trade-Offs: Enhancing Student Engagement in a Service Course in Agriculture and Natural Resources

Jamey L. Pavey¹ and David Ostermeier²

Due to urbanization and industrialization, the American public is becoming increasingly detached from the sources of its food and fiber. When asked where milk comes from, some children reply “the grocery store.” Service courses in agriculture and natural resources are an opportunity for natural resource educators to help students make these connections and to inform students about the trade-offs involved in the production of the food and fiber upon which they rely. This can help to produce consumers who can make educated decisions about their consumption. We have coordinated a service course at the University of Tennessee titled “Food, Forests, and the Environment” for several years. In an effort to stimulate student engagement in the course and reflection about the topics covered, we have experimented with different course requirements, from class presentations to essay exams to journals. Utilizing course evaluations completed by the students at the end of each semester and student focus groups, we examine responses to the different course requirements and specifically evaluate the effectiveness of journaling and reflective writing assignments in increasing student engagement and reflection. Finally, we want to foster a discussion regarding how other universities are educating students regarding the trade-offs involved in the production of the food and fiber.

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