

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Local And Mainland Students Experience VI Culture And Agriculture During AgDiscovery 2017

Education / **Published On August 14, 2017 01:09 PM /**

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ST. CROIX -- A group of teenagers, most of them visiting from the U.S. mainland, gathered at the University of the Virgin Islands' cafeteria on Saturday morning, seemingly having a great time during the closing ceremony of the two-week AgDiscovery 2017 Summer Enrichment Program, the only one of its kind in the Caribbean.

They had gathered to celebrate their successful completion of the roughly twelve-day experience, whose aim was to help the students determine whether or not they wanted to pursue a career in agriculture when they attend college, and if so, what exactly in the more than 300 career paths they wanted to do.

The event was lighthearted, with students receiving recognition from their peers for otherwise inessential achievements. The program itself, though, was anything but.

The students, who stayed on the U.V.I. campus for the program's duration, were taught through interactive classroom activities, according to Louis E. Petersen, Jr., assistant director of the St. Thomas-St. John District Cooperative Extension Service. The students also kept a tight schedule, including the time they ate meals, according to Mr. Petersen. The activity schedule included classroom presentations, laboratory and greenhouse work, visits to farms, UVI research plots, and sites of cultural and historic significance. An analysis of the pre and post program tests indicated that the participants' level of knowledge regarding agricultural science and related disciplines was greatly increased.

The students were taken to the farmer's market and the Whim Museum to get an understanding of the territory's history. They also had an opportunity to interact with the 4-H Youth Ambassadors. "Every minute was occupied," Mr. Petersen said.

Almost all of the students, however, came from the U.S. The program, which is federally funded, saw interested teens from around the mainland applying to attend. Students also had to take a test, with those who scored the highest being selected. The results saw 17 students from various states being accepted into this year's program, and 3 from the Virgin Islands, although 10 applied -- one from Eudora Kean High School on St. Thomas, another from a home school program on St. Thomas, and one from St. Joseph High School on St. Croix. "We cannot select based on where you're from, it has to be based on your scores," Mr. Petersen said of the program. "Who you see here are the top 20 scorers."

Mr. Petersen deemed the program a success compared to last year's. He was also wholly satisfied with the students' performance following a posttest. The students were asked about the territory's history as well as the agriculture knowledge provided during the program. "They did extremely well. It says that we were successful in accomplishing and conveying information that we wanted to convey, and they are now leaving with a very good sense of local culture, but also technical skills in agriculture," Mr. Petersen said.

The program also achieved its goal of helping students decide on their career paths. Mr. Petersen revealed that one of the St. Thomas students, who leaned towards becoming a veterinarian before AgDiscovery 2017 started, came out of the program with certainty. "This program has helped her decide for sure that that's what she wants to do," he said.

AgDiscovery 2017 was co-hosted by the U.V.I. Cooperative Extension Service and the Agricultural Experiment Station. Funding was provided by the U.S.D.A. Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. U.S.D.A., whose representatives were at the closing ceremony, committed to supporting the 2018 program, according to Mr. Petersen, who deemed their commitment as a sign of U.S.D.A.'s satisfaction with the outcome.