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25 Additional High School and College Students Introduced to Agricultural Entrepreneurship Through Amps Retreat

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Elesha George **February 17, 2023**

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The Amps Entrepreneurship Leadership Institute has trained another cohort of students in the U.S. Virgin Islands to consider ways in which they can increase agricultural production in the territory. The company's goal is to generate interest in agriculture through youth entrepreneurship.

This month, 25 high school and college students on St. Thomas attended a retreat that began on February 3rd at the University of the Virgin Islands, School of Agriculture.

There, the students worked alongside farmers and business owners to create business ideas in agriculture. They met mentors like Luis Cruz-Arroyo, Caribbean Area director for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, who encouraged science-

based farming solutions, such as how to improve water quality.

Tiana Wilson-Matthew, a counselor at Ivanna Eudora Kean High School, said she wanted the students to embrace the thought of owning their own business.

"I want them to understand commerce and I want them to understand why they need to learn how to grow their own food and [how to] be a business owner," she said.

Meanwhile, Dr. Louis Petersen, UVI's assistant director of agriculture, is hoping that the students will bring welcomed change in the sector following the retreat. He said the main issue in the territory is that it is "at the extreme end of being a dependent territory" since most of its food is imported.

"Some estimates say that 99 percent of our food's imported at some times and so that means that we have a real need to boost our agricultural sector," he explained.

According to Mr. Peterson, the agriculture system in the territory is underdeveloped, desperately in need of new thinkers, teachers, producers and researchers that can help build the industry.

"We used to have at one time the K-through-12 system in the Virgin Islands introducing youngsters from [grades] K-through-12 to the science of agriculture. That is no longer in place, which means that at the university level we have no feeder system into our schools," he said.

In the days leading up to the retreat, Commissioner of Agriculture Positive Nelson said he was hopeful that the opportunity would allow the students to begin to make tangible changes in the territory's agricultural sector.

"There are many things that are lacking here, especially in agriculture, especially for what the farmers need," he said, noting that the average age of a farmer in the USVI is about 67 years old.

Mr. Nelson added, "There are a lot of things that young people can utilize as well as the technology like some of these new apps that provide services to these farmers — especially in record-keeping, accounting or marketing and using digitization to market farmers' commodities. I think it's endless."

The training will continue until 2024 as following the retreat, the students will embark on a year-long mentorship program to build on their ideas or to develop new ones.

"This model introduces youth to careers they might not normally consider. Everybody wants to 'Save the Environment' but what if you could help do it and build a career out of it? More importantly, your own business," posited James Amps, founder of Amps Institute.

At the end of the retreat, the students received hands-on business training, formed teams, and competed for cash prizes for the best conservation-oriented business plan.

Last November, 20 students on St. Croix participated in the program, which will next be delivered in Puerto Rico.