

Mesa College is putting its best Ag forward in a nationwide challenge.

EDUCATION: Agricultural Exports Focus of Nationwide Program

By Karen Pearlman | February 26, 2024

San Diego Mesa College is putting its best Ag forward in a nationwide challenge.

Under the mentoring of geography professor Dr. Waverly C. Ray, a group of four students at San Diego Mesa is competing against teams from 18 other minority-serving learning institutions across the U.S., part of an immersive learning experience backed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS).

The USDA's Agricultural Export Market Challenge uses a case study method and role playing to simulate the work that FAS subject matter experts perform every day to increase export opportunities for U.S. food and agricultural products.

The Challenge, which started earlier this month and ends in March, is providing hands-on learning experiences keying in on the business of exporting food and agricultural products around the world. Through it, students are getting a taste of diplomacy, marketing, scientific analysis and trade policy.

The SD Mesa group was given the specific challenge to develop an export market strategy for a fictitious cooperative called "Dreamy Dairy." The faux dairy coop is ostensibly looking to develop a plan to expand sales opportunities for its most commercially successful cheese to foreign markets.

"(The students) will review their findings and prepare a onepage summary that synthesizes their research, makes a recommendation for a particular export market and identifies the export market with the most trade barriers," Ray said.

The competition ends in March when teams offer solutions in 10-minute online presentations with FAS representatives.

The winning team will be invited to travel to Washington, D.C. to meet with FAS leaders and Challenge mentors at a date to be determined.



Agriculture, a huge revenue driver in San Diego County, is part of San Diego Mesa College, which has a campus vegetable garden. Some students at the school are currently part of a USDA challenge. Photo courtesy TerraMesa Environmental Sustainability and Conservation Club



Dr. Waverly C. Ray
Professor of
Geography
San Diego Mesa
College



Xochitl Torres Small
Deputy Secretary
U.S. Department of
Agriculture



Jenny Tong
Business student
San Diego Mesa
College

economics,

Guided by Ray, who applied to the USDA last fall for the opportunity to compete on behalf of Mesa, the Challenge team consists of Carson Brumfield, a chemistry major; Aidan Middleton, a business major; Jenny Tong, an economics/business major; and Victoria Velasquez, a business administration major. Tong said when Ray told her about the challenge, it spoke equally to her business mind and her green thumb.

Learning About International Relations and More

“I spend a lot of time in my own garden at home with a variety of fruit trees, so I thought this was a great way to merge my two interests,” Tong said. “I’ve considered going into Agribusiness after graduation and learning more about international relations as well which is ultimately what made me decide to be a part of this team.”

Tong said the new experience “will give all of us valuable insight on the type of work agricultural officials do on a day-to-day basis.”

U.S. Department of Agriculture Deputy Secretary Xochitl Torres Small said that American farmers deserve access to “new, more, and better markets through trade.”

She said the

USDA is training future leaders to help expand those opportunities, including the launch two years ago of the Challenge.

With more than 5,000 rural and urban farms as reported in late 2023 by the San Diego Department of Weights and Measures, San Diego County has more farms than any other county in U.S. There is also a high concentration of organic producers in the region, with smaller farms that are mostly family-owned.

The county’s agriculture sector is a huge contributor to the local economy and is also one of the largest industries in the region, generating around \$2.88 billion in revenue. The county is the largest producer of nursery crops in California and also has the highest number of part-time farmers in the nation.

All of this has provided around 16,000 jobs in the San Diego economy and made the region amongst the highest ranked counties in the state in terms of value of production -- due mostly to a temperate climate that makes it suitable to grow crops year-round.

Ray, in her 10th year as full-time professor at Mesa, is the faculty advisor to TerraMesa Environmental Sustainability and Conservation Club, the student-run group overseeing the campus vegetable garden.

Last year, SD Mesa received a grant from San Diego Foundation for a project called “Strengthening our Roots: Expanded Food Sovereignty through TerraMesa & Garden 31,” which allowed the school to expand production, build community and provide paid internships to students. Last semester, Ray said 244 pounds of food were distributed to 63 students.

Addressing Sustainability, Food Insecurity

Ray also coordinates a subaward from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture for a grant awarded to principal investigator Dr. Pascale Joassart-Marcelli at San Diego State University called “Transnational Approaches to Sustainable Food Futures: Integrated High-Impact Learning Experiences and Multiple Pathways to Food Careers.”

Ray said the overarching goals of these efforts are to build students' knowledge, interest and skills in both agriculture and the food system so that our communities can address the compounding issues of food insecurity and climate change.

The export market for agricultural products has grown in recent years. In its 2021 Crop Statistics & Annual Report, the county's Department of Agriculture Weights and Measures Agricultural Commissioner Ha Dang reported 8,982 shipments to 47 different countries.

The Challenge is designed for upper-division students but is not exclusive to four-year universities, and Mesa was one of only three community colleges chosen by the USDA.

"We wanted to bring this to our students at San Diego Mesa College in order to introduce them to novel academic opportunities early in their educational journeys," Ray said. "By giving them an early exposure to real-world practices, they can apply what they are learning in the classroom, identify the skills that they think they will utilize in the future, and have a broadened understanding of what awaits them once they transfer and earn their undergraduate degrees."