CSSA President’s Message

World Food Prize Youth Institute: Nurturing Fresh, Innovative Ideas from Our NextGen Scientists

In late April, high school students from across the state of Iowa converged on Iowa State University (ISU) along with their mentoring teachers (and parents) to participate in the World Food Prize (WFP) Iowa Youth Institute (IYI). The IYI invites high school students to research, document, and present solutions to pressing food security issues around the world. This year, more than 800 students from across the state submitted projects; 294 were invited to Iowa State University to compete for an opportunity to attend the WFP events in Des Moines. About one-third of these were selected; many more were deserving. I have had the privilege and pleasure of judging these student projects every year since the program began and have been so impressed with the insights, passion, and optimism these young people have for overcoming food insecurity around the world. It is truly an inspiring event.

The IYI is now in its seventh year. It started out as a relatively small program at ISU designed to engage Iowa youth with “local experts” pursuing Dr. Normal Borlaug’s vision of ending world hunger. I clearly remember how the whole program that first year—all of the students, teachers, experts, sponsors, and organizers—fit into a few rooms of our student union building. This year, we needed all the meeting rooms of ISU’s Scheman Convention Center and the mammoth Hilton Coliseum to house the program. These are big buildings! More than 70 leaders from non-profit organizations, NGOs, industry, academia, and local, state, and federal government volunteered to meet with the students to discuss their projects or provide immersion activities on and around campus. It was obvious how excited these leaders were to participate in this event. Many openly remarked how knowledgeable students were about the complex social, economic, scientific, and political issues surrounding food security—and how serious they were about confronting those issues.

Role Models for Young Women

This year’s event also highlighted a suite of incredible achievements. The vast majority (72%) of student participants were young women. The keynote address was given by Dr. Chavonda Jacobs-Young, the first woman acting chief scientist and REE deputy under secretary for the USDA. The students also were addressed by Kim Reynolds, the first woman governor of Iowa, and Dr. Wendy Wintersteen, the first woman president of Iowa State University. All three women are extremely capable leaders and tireless proponents of STEM education. What incredible role models for young women interested in pursuing careers in plant sciences.

It is remarkable how quickly the WFP Youth Institute has grown from its Iowa roots into a national phenomenon. Today there are Youth Institute programs in 20 states. This rapid growth reflects a very conscious effort by the WFP Foundation to expand its youth education programs.

Kelsey Tyrrell, Director of Global Education Programs at the WFP noted, “What I appreciate most about the [youth] institute is that every student has the opportunity to apply [his or her] own unique talents to addressing food insecurity. From crop scientists to communication specialists, it will take a multitude of professions working together to feed 9 billion people by 2050, and we need to ensure the fresh, innovative ideas of young adults are heard.” I couldn’t agree more with Kelsey.

How You Can Help

So what steps can we take as members of CSSA to nurture those individuals with “fresh, innovative ideas” to follow their passions as our next generation of scientists? If you have a WFP Youth Institute in your state, contact the organizers to volunteer as an expert or to lead an immersion activity. Let the students know why you are passionate about crop-related sciences. If you live in one of those 30 states that does not have a WFP Youth Institute yet, contact Kelsey Tyrrell now to get one started (515-245-3702 or ktyrrell@worldfoodprize.org or). I know you will find it an enormously rewarding experience.