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Ag enrollments mixed bag at state universities  
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FarmWeek

Agricultural enrollment at the four state universities with agricultural programs generally reflect enrollment on their respective campuses this fall.

Freshmen agriculture students outnumber students transferring to complete their degrees at all four universities. This bucked a recent trend of a larger percentage of transfer students among the incoming students.

For a campus-by-campus roundup, **FarmWeek** spoke with officials at Illinois State University, Southern Illinois University, University of Illinois and Western Illinois University.

**Illinois State University**

Following one of its highest enrollments and graduation, Illinois State University (ISU) experienced a decrease in undergraduate and graduate students studying agriculture, according to David Kopsell, agriculture department assistant chairperson.

Kopsell reported a combined undergrad and grad enrollment of nearly 500 students. This compares to a previous enrollment of 600. Campuswide, ISU reported its largest freshman class which pushed enrollment to 20,878, a 1.2% increase compared to fall 2018.

Among ISU’s programs of agriculture majors, Kopsell described enrollment as “relatively stable.”

Although large numbers of freshmen came to campus, the ISU ag department saw a decrease in transfer students, particularly from community colleges. Previously, roughly 60% of incoming students were transfer students.

“The (student) population at the community college level is decreasing,” Kopsell explained.

To continue expanding options, ISU is offering new ag-related courses, including its first organic crop production course.

Ag faculty and alumni are focusing on recruiting future Redbirds. Faculty are targeting community colleges, and alumni, especially those teaching high school agriculture, to make their students aware of opportunities, according to Kopsell.

**Southern Illinois University**

At Southern Illinois University (SIU), agriculture undergraduate and graduate students reflect decreased enrollment on the Carbondale campus, according to John Groninger, acting associate dean of the College of Agricultural Sciences.

This fall, 706 undergraduates and grad students are studying agriculture at SIU-C. The university reported a total enrollment of 11,695, down 8.75% from fall 2018.

Groninger noted nearly equal numbers of freshmen and transfer students. In the past, transfer students outnumbered incoming freshmen, but the current trend is an overall decrease in community college students transferring to in-state universities, he added.

“A lot of out-of-state schools have been aggressively working” to recruit Illinois community college students, Groninger said.

At Carbondale, hemp and legalized recreational cannabis studies spurred increased enrollment in SIU’s horticulture program. SIU is researching industrial hemp harvested for cannabidiol (CBD) as a cover crop.

In addition, the college is pursuing but had not received approval for courses related to indoor production of medicinal and recreational marijuana that would result in awarding certificates through the horticulture program.

Student recruitment is a high priority. “We’ve spent a lot of time putting together a transfer guide for community college students, and we’re expecting that to turn around,” Groninger said. “We’re also going to look for transfer students from out of state. ... We’ve got new faculty and more are coming.”

SIU-C has been in the midst of a restructure. “All the things we need to do are in place,” Groninger said. “Reorganization right now is building synergy with other programs on campus and for agriculture.”

**University of Illinois**

University of IllinoisCollege of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) reported higher undergraduate enrollment of 2,801, compared to 2,631 the previous fall. On the Urbana-Champaign campus, undergraduate and graduate student enrollment increased to 51,196, compared to 49,339 in 2018.

ACES Dean Kim Kidwell reported increases in both freshmen and transfer ag students, compared to the previous year. The transfer student increase was partially attributed to the college’s close relationship with community colleges around the state.

“We have worked diligently to articulate what we do and why it matters to potential students, and to offer them exciting opportunities to create vibrant career pathways through ACES majors that will allow them to make a difference in the world,” Kidwell said.

Agricultural and consumer economics remains as the largest program followed by animal sciences. A new Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications program, which combined ag education and ag communications, includes 124 students.

The largest percentage of growth occurred in an undeclared major program that is starting a second year. Students who are unsure of their major can enroll in the college without committing to a major right away.

**Western Illinois University**

In Macomb, the School of Agriculture reported a drop in agriculture students at Western Illinois University (WIU). Undergraduates number 249, compared to 277 the previous year, said Andrew Baker, agriculture school director. WIU reported the Macomb campus enrollment was 6,432, down compared to 7,235 in fall 2018.

Baker reported an increase in freshmen, but a decrease in transfer students, which he attributed to fewer community college students.

One bright spot, an increase in students studying agricultural education saw the major increase to 27, compared to previous enrollments ranging from 21 to 25 students, Baker said.

Baker points to new ag-related courses and programs as reflecting industry changes. This fall, WIU began offering its first hydroponic horticulture courses.

Agriculture business students may enroll in a new “bridge program” in which students simultaneously work toward bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Agricultural business courses count toward a master’s degree in business administration, Baker explained, adding, “You can get two degrees in five years.”

In addition, WIU recently received a $10 million federal grant to study an alternative cover crop for biofuel as part of a multi-university project.

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