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FROM COMMUNITY TO CAREER

HOW MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY'S MANRRS CHAPTER IS BUILDING COMMUNITY AND CONNECTIONS IN FORESTRY

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MANRRS

For many students pursuing careers in agriculture, natural resources, STEM, and related fields, finding a community of peers and professionals can play an important role in shaping their academic and professional journeys. MANRRS is a national organization focused on supporting students and professionals through mentorship, networking, leadership, career development, and professional growth.

Through Junior, Collegiate, and Professional membership levels, MANRRS creates opportunities for students to connect with peers, mentors, industry professionals, and potential career pathways. The organization also emphasizes community and belonging, helping students build relationships and gain experiences that can support them throughout their education and careers.

Building a Community at Michigan State University

Michigan State University (MSU) is home to the founding chapter of MANRRS. The chapter began in the early-1980s when a group of students in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources recognized that they were often the only students of color in their classes. They came together to build a stronger sense of community and support, originally forming an organization called Minorities in Agriculture and Natural Resources, or MANRA.

Dr. Dave Weatherspoon, Vice Provost of Enrollment and Academic Strategic Planning at MSU and one of the founding members, helped establish the organization with classmates and support from MSU faculty and staff.

What began as an effort to create community among students at Michigan State would soon grow into a national network connecting students and professionals across agriculture, natural resources, and related fields.

From an MSU Student Organization to a National Network

The MSU chapter quickly became part of a larger effort to connect students across universities. In 1985, Weatherspoon, Dr. Eunice Foster, and other members traveled to Pennsylvania State University to help students establish a similar organization.

In 1986, MSU and Penn State brought students and faculty from several institutions together in East Lansing for the first national conference, laying the foundation for what would become MANRRS.

Today, that national network provides students with opportunities to connect with peers and professionals while developing skills and exploring pathways into agriculture, natural resources, STEM, and related careers.



Finding Mentorship and Belonging

The MSU chapter continues to provide students with opportunities to build community, develop leadership skills, connect with mentors and professionals, and explore academic and career opportunities.

Club Advisor Stephanie Chau supports the chapter and its students as they take part in these opportunities and build connections across agriculture, natural resources, and related fields. MANRRS welcomes students of all backgrounds and majors to get involved.

Students can participate in research presentations, public speaking and other competitions, conferences, and professional development activities. For students pursuing forestry and natural resources, these experiences can provide opportunities to build confidence, develop professional skills, and connect with people who can help them navigate their academic and career journeys.

MSU students have described MANRRS as a supportive community where they can connect with people of color in agriculture and natural resources, find mentors, and see examples of people who have pursued careers in their fields.



Learning Through Experience

For students involved in the MSU chapter, MANRRS provides opportunities that extend beyond the classroom. Conferences, competitions, research presentations, professional development, and networking events allow students to practice skills and make connections that can shape their educational and professional journeys.

Esther Tonade, MS Forestry Student, Michigan State University

"Being part of MANRRS has contributed meaningfully to my development as a forestry student. I had the opportunity to present my research at a national MANRRS conference, where I shared my work and connected with students and professionals in forestry and natural resources. MANRRS also supported my academic journey through a scholarship, which encouraged me to continue pursuing my goals. In addition, the organization gave me a platform to serve as a Graduate Coordinator, allowing me to support other students while developing my leadership and communication skills. These experiences have strengthened my confidence and prepared me to contribute meaningfully to the forestry profession."

Exploring Career Possibilities

For other students, MANRRS has provided opportunities to meet professionals and learn about career possibilities that may not have been part of their original plans.

Corey McKenzie, Junior Forestry Student, Michigan State University

As I prepare for my future in Forestry, MANRRS has truly taught me the importance of networking and keeping an open mind, regarding my career. I have met countless professionals at the events, like the 2024 Regional Cluster and 2025 and 2026 National Training Conference and Career Expo, that have given me career advice, and something that I've carried with me is being open to new experiences. Even if things I have done don't seem to fully correlate with my initial career plans, networking with folks in different space and gaining new transferable and technical skills has been really rewarding for me.

McKenzie's experience highlights one of the ways professional organizations can help students explore careers. By meeting people working in different areas and learning from their experiences, students can begin to see how their interests and skills might translate into a variety of professional pathways and leadership pathways. Corey began his journey as a Jr. MANRRS student in high school and is now serving as the MSU chapter president.

Building Confidence for the Future

For students progressing through higher education, those connections can also provide encouragement and confidence as they take their next steps.

Jasmine Brown, PhD Candidate in the Michigan State University Department of Forestry

As I prepare for my future in Forestry, my involvement in MANRRS has helped mold me into the scientist and professional that I am today. Being a part of MANRRS strengthened my public speaking skills, problem solving, and showed me how to dress professionally. Attending MANRRS local, regional, and national events provided me with a sense of belonging within broader environmental fields. Overall, MANRRS provided me with mentors that gave me the encouragement to finish my Masters degree and the confidence to apply for the Doctorate program I'm currently in.

Brown's experience demonstrates how mentorship and a sense of belonging can continue to influence students as they move through their academic and professional journeys.



Continuing a Legacy

From a group of MSU students seeking community in the 1980s to a national organization connecting students and professionals today, MANRRS has continued to create opportunities for students to build relationships, develop skills, and explore their futures.

At Michigan State University, the founding chapter continues that legacy by providing students with a community where they can connect with peers and mentors, gain professional experience, and explore opportunities in forestry, agriculture, natural resources, and related fields.

For students like Tonade, McKenzie, and Brown, those experiences extend beyond individual conferences or activities. They represent opportunities to build confidence, develop professional skills, and form connections that can continue throughout their academic and career journeys.

Thank You!

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