

Turfgrass Education and Recruiting for the Future


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Introduction

Enrollment in turfgrass science at colleges and universities has seen a decline in the past 10 to 15 years. In a survey conducted by Golf Course Management magazine, 40 schools were asked about turfgrass program enrollment. 70% have encountered lower enrollment compared to 10 years ago.

- University of Missouri reported 25 students in 2001, declining to 8 by 2016.
- Iowa State peaked at about 143 students in the early 2000s, and reported 40 undergrads in 2014.
- Purdue's program currently has about 43 students. Twelve years ago, there were 85 enrolled.
- Oregon State's enrollment is down to approximately 15 students from a peak of 35.
- At Texas A&M, turfgrass student enrollment is 40, half of what it was a little over a decade ago.
- Student numbers at University of Kentucky have decreased 93% in the past 20 years.
- North Carolina State's two-year and four-year programs had as many as 197 students 15 years ago, which has now dropped to 73.
- Kirkwood Community College's Golf Course and Turfgrass Management program currently has 45-50 students, compared to 65-70 in the past.
- Michigan State reports about 30 undergraduates in the two-year program – at one point there were 70-80 students.
- University of Connecticut has seen a 52% drop in turfgrass majors over the past 10 years.

This white paper discusses various options for colleges and universities to implement to help attract students to turfgrass science as a career option.

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Background/Problems

High School

- Many students are unaware of turfgrass science as a career path or associated careers.
- Due to liability issues, some golf courses cannot hire teens younger than 18 anymore.
- Secondary agriculture teachers report the population dynamic and course of study has shifted at the secondary level.
- Careers in the green industry – arboriculture, horticulture, turfgrass, etc. – were popular 10-15 years ago; now student interests in Agriculture programs have shifted towards Animal Science careers.

University

- Lower enrollment may be attributed to a change in entry requirements. The bar for university admission has been raised based on performance in high school and standardized test scores. Students that would be successful in a turfgrass program at a college or university based on prior metrics may not be eligible for admission under current standards.
 - At NCSU, the average incoming freshman GPA is 4.4 on a 4-point scale. To get that GPA, Advanced Placement and honors courses need to be taken. A lot of turf students come from rural areas where those classes may not be available. If students want to attend a 4-year college and be a turfgrass major, they need to either have the GPA or come in as a transfer student.
 - For states that have guaranteed tuition (such as from a lottery), students entering agriculture majors are having a hard time meeting minimum ACT/SAT and GPA requirements to qualify for entry. Some of this is due to our traditional base from rural areas, where the schools may not have the wide range of AP and College Prep courses available.
- Relatively low starting salaries for green industry majors compared to many other science- or business-based careers (engineering, finance, etc.) make it hard to recruit into the turfgrass field. A Sports Turf Manager's mean salary is \$65,300 and the median is \$62,000. An Assistant Sports Turf Manager's mean salary is \$45,149; and median is \$43,000. Per the National Association of Colleges and Employers, the average starting salary for a 2016 graduate with a bachelor's degree is around \$50,000.
- Declining numbers may result in program changes at colleges and universities.
 - Consolidation of turfgrass programs into plant science – a loss of 'program identification'.
 - Florida Gateway College (previously Lake City Community College) will no longer offer an associate's degree in golf course operations. The college used to have a one-year waiting list and was well known nationally and internationally.

Professional

- Leaders may not be marketing themselves or the industry to the extent needed.
- In some cases, professionals may be advising students to follow career paths that offer more money for less labor.



Solutions

- **Reach out to local FFA Chapters and agriculture programs for guest speaking opportunities.**
 - Institute a turfgrass specific FFA Career Development Event (CDE) in your state. Michigan and New Jersey already have a turfgrass CDE. Another option is to create a Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) for each state for students to be a part of.
 - [The Missouri FFA CDE Handbook](#) illustrates how an FFA contest is put together and how easily turfgrass science can be incorporated as a CDE.
 - Start a 'career day' for high school FFA programs that tag-teams with other educational program offerings (like state FFA conferences and have tours of athletic fields or research plots). Partner with Cooperative Extension agents located in various regions who can communicate with local agriculture teachers in their area. Schedule the event with teaching/testing calendars at the school and coincide with other scheduled turfgrass meetings that bring industry leaders and educators together. This could include job shadowing of turfgrass management professionals.
- **Develop 'alternative' recruitment strategies such as hosting field days at high-end sports facilities. Recruit not just students in ag-based high school activities, but athletes and science-based students.**
- **Invite local agriculture programs to Turf Field Days. Consider waiving registration fees for agriculture teachers and their students to increase interest in attending.**
- **Get involved in teacher training. Teachers attend professional development courses throughout the summer to learn about new topics to teach in the classroom. This is also true of university/college/department recruiters. Student recruiters may know little about programs in the agriculture department. How do you sell something if you don't understand it?**
- **Promote turfgrass science curriculums to high schools.**
 - STMA has a Turfgrass Science Curriculum directed towards secondary students that is available for purchase.
- **Consider an Ag Day or an Ag VIP program at your college or university.**
 - Invite high school juniors, advisors, and guidance counselors to tour the college campus and learn about the various career options available in agriculture.
 - Perkins funds may be available to fund this trip (available for career tech programs at K-12 level and JUCO).
 - Consider scholarships for prospective students.
 - One program presents nontraditional awards (scholarships, etc.) to individuals. For example, women in agriculture are considered nontraditional. This helps improve accessibility and awareness of different fields.
- **Engage non-majors with general education classes.**
 - Community colleges and universities offer introductory plant science classes that include a turfgrass science component.
 - This may spawn interest in the field by informing students of career options and outlining potential job opportunities.

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Solutions (cont.)

- Ensure the agriculture department is part of campus tours or career days for prospective students.
 - Have college recruiters expose potential students to turfgrass careers. On tours or careers days, try to have an academic and/or practitioner speak to students about careers in turfgrass science.
- Contact alumni to feature their work in the industry and help lead young people into the profession. Alumni can be featured in publications, advertisements, or commercials. In addition, alumni can provide internship opportunities to students.
- Advertise turfgrass science as a profession at sporting events or in program booklets. A 1-2-minute video about the university turfgrass program could air on the jumbotron at football games. Program booklets could feature information about the grounds crew and field care.
- Publicize the work of alumni, students, and academics in turfgrass using various media outlets. Articles about the career, academic programs, and people in the career may generate student interest.
- Create a website that promotes careers in turfgrass and the end product of proper turfgrass management.
 - Include job and internship opportunities.
 - Profile successful individuals in nontraditional turfgrass science careers to help increase awareness.
 - Provide data on numbers, salaries, etc. Keep the information simple and easy to navigate. [Click here for an example from Delaware Valley University.](#)
- Use videos to promote the turfgrass profession. [Click here for an example from Texas A&M University.](#)
- Social media provides an outlet for pictures, videos, and promotions - get coaches involved to recognize the sports turf managers that care for the field, highlight the profession, produce an educational snippet, recognize the support of commercial companies, and generate hype around the profession by featuring athletes and school spirit.
- Work with Community Colleges to allow credit transfer to precede a four-year degree.
- Utilize local STMA chapters. Chapter members are connected to their local community and can assist with student recruitment and industry awareness.
- Job security in the turfgrass industry is good. Per the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 178,000 first-line supervisors in turf management in 2014 (examples of job titles include Field Manager, Grounds Crew Supervisor, Grounds Foreman, etc.). They predict 39,000 job openings will be created in the next 10 years, with a projected industry growth of 5-8% during that same period. There are more job opportunities available than qualified people now, and that trend will continue. A much-touted statistic is that more than 90 percent of graduates who earn a degree in sports turf management land a job right out of college.