

Planting Seeds of Change: Cuts to DEI and the Athens Land Trust's Young Urban Farmers

By Lauren Chapman



Patricia Rodriguez organizes the plant beds at the Williams Farm. Each bed is labeled with a popsicle stick. Photo Credit: Lauren Chapman.

Many organizations are already starting to see the effects of the termination of Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) the USDA funding freeze. One of these organizations is the Young Urban Farmers (YUF).

High school students meet multiple times a week at Williams Farm in Athens, GA to learn about agriculture through growing their own crops, selling their products at the farmers' market, taking field trips, composting, listening to guest speakers and much more. In addition, the students can earn \$15 an hour for their work.

Randall Priest, the head coordinator for YUF, noted that their program is changing due to the funding freeze. The program is funded by USDA grants, so this freeze affects them directly.

“We like having around six Young Urban Farmers,” Priest stated. “Except we only have four right now, and there was going to be a push to hire some more. But with the funding freezes, we’re so unsure about funding and we’re so unsure about what’s coming next that we’ve decided to hit a pause.”

Priest says that he is honest with his students about what’s happening with DEI and the funding freeze.

“We have discourse about what’s happening, what it means for us and what it means for people like us that are doing the work we’re doing,” Priest stated. “And sometimes they’re upset about it. It sucks that it’s happening, but it’s good to be knowledgeable. And it’s good to manage those emotions, and be upset about it. But also what can we do about it? Move forward.”



The Young Urban Farmers have dozens of plants in their greenhouse. They have several greenhouses throughout their farm. Photo Credit: Lauren Chapman.

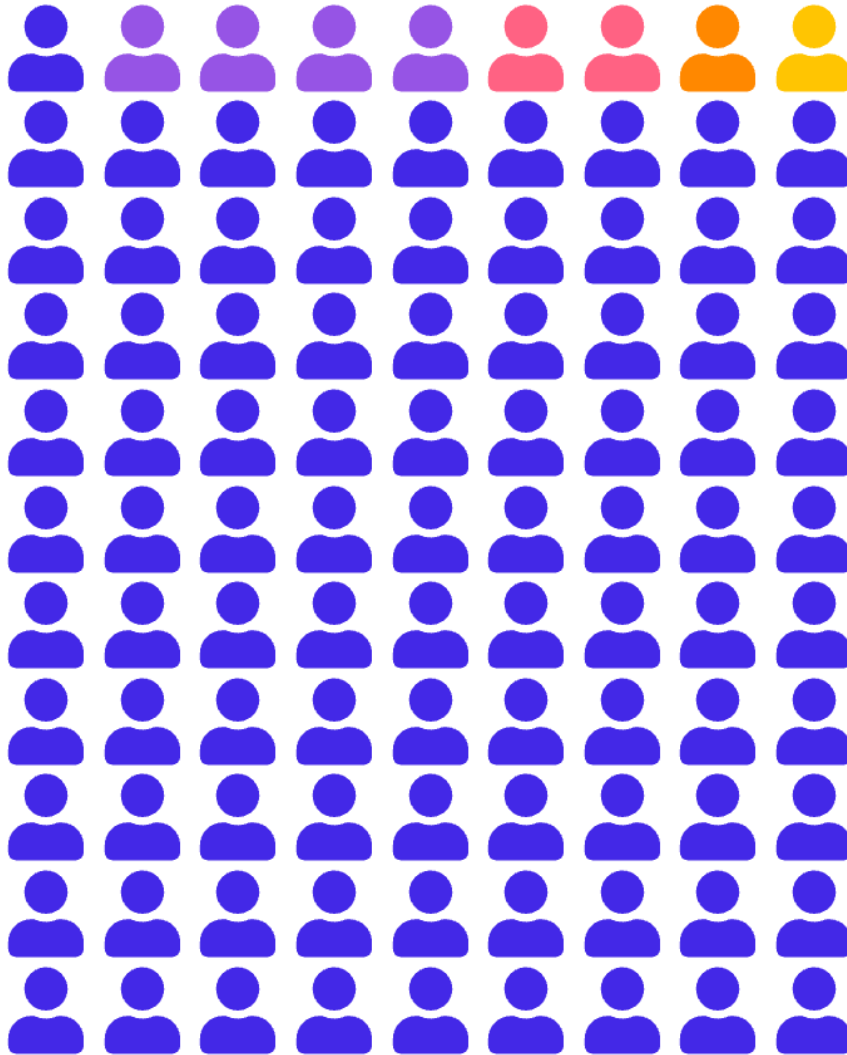
Priest also noted how the future of the program, his job and his students’ jobs could be in jeopardy.

“I’m real with them that it could affect the work I do with them, and it could affect their work,” Priest stated.

In comparison, farms across the country are facing the same problems. According to a survey conducted by the USDA, 91% of farmers in America are white and 64% are male. In addition, Black farmers are more likely to have a farm that is at high financial risk of going under compared to all other races. And this statistic may continue to grow if the Trump Administration includes farming in their series of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) rollbacks. Without funding, many farms owned by socially disadvantaged individuals could collapse.

Percentage of Farmers By Race

Non-Hispanic White Hispanic
American Indian/Alaskan Native Black/African American
Asian



Source: USDA

Under the federal [Enhancing Program Access and Delivery for Farm Loans Rule](#), over **\$2 billion** was given to farmers of color, female farmers, financially disadvantaged farmers and other socially disadvantaged farmers. When the Trump Administration took office in January of 2025, they ordered for the USDA to reevaluate their programs to make sure that DEI is not included in any of them. This includes a funding freeze on several programs within the USDA until further notice. With diversity at the forefront of this rule, it could be in danger of being discontinued.

Inside Young Farmers

However, the Young Urban Farmers are learning how to navigate the agricultural field in an anti-DEI country. The program YUF, which was founded in 2013 by the Athens Land Trust, partners with Athens-Clarke County's three high schools to encourage a career in agriculture. Dozens of students have come through the program since its start, and some of its graduates went on to have a farm of their own.

According to the USDA, young producers, which refers to farmers under the age of 35, make up 15% of all agricultural sales in the United States, and this program wants to increase that number.



Coordinator for YUF, Randall Priest, gives Rodriguez her assignment for the day. He brought her various types of cucumber and melon seeds to plant. Photo Credit: Lauren Chapman.

Patricia Rodriguez, an 11th grader at Cedar Shoals High School, has been a part of this program for about two years now. She says her love of agriculture started in 8th grade.

“I took an agriculture class and I thought it was boring,” Rodriguez said. “I had to retake it during Covid. When I was forced to sit down and listen, it became interesting. I ended up loving it and winning a bunch of awards while doing it.”

She says that she likes the aspect of selling the produce she grows.

“We sold our stuff to the housing district (the affordable housing district in Athens) over at West Broad,” Rodriguez said. “It was really fun, and I liked doing it, but we’re not doing it this year. We’re selling over at the Marigold Market this year.”

YUF has a requirement that only low income students can participate. This requirement ensures that these students have opportunities that may not be available to them because of their financial status. This program is currently full, but Athens-Clarke County high school students can fill out the [waitlist](#) to be notified if a spot is available and when applications for the next cohort open up.



Williams Farm is owned by the Athens Land Trust. They grow various crops, such as onions, basil and collards. Photo Credit: Lauren Chapman

While Rodriguez says that she doesn't plan on pursuing this field after college, she still likes doing it.

"I like it more as a hobby," Rodriguez said. "I think I wanna major in physics or chemistry or engineering."

While not every student plans on pursuing a career in agriculture and the future of this program seems uncertain, these students are gaining skills that will help them for years to come.

Audio Link:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1HE1U2IPFF0S5giUL1huGhNJciwPT46nn/view?usp=sharing>

