

AG RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

LEVON ESTERS

"We need racial and ethnic minority students choosing and persisting in STEM disciplines, so they can contribute to the STEM workforce in the U.S. and globally."

—Levon Esters, Associate Professor, Youth Development and Agricultural Education

The Ag Research Spotlight shines each month on an individual whose work reflects our commitment to the six strategic themes that guide Agricultural Research at Purdue. Our spotlight for April 2013 underscores the theme, "Facilitating informed decision making to improve economic and social well-being."

The Researcher: Levon Esters' urban upbringing in Chicago was tempered by his father's hobby farm in South Haven, Michigan. In his youth, Levon preferred basketball to blueberries, but the farm complemented his choice to study agricultural business at Florida A&M University. He then returned home to teach at the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences before pursuing a master's degree in agricultural education at North Carolina A&T State University. Along the way, he met Dr. Blannie Bowen, currently vice provost for academic affairs at The Pennsylvania State University. Esters credits Bowen with guiding him personally and professionally as he completed a PhD in Agricultural and Extension Education at Penn State and began his career on the faculty at Iowa State University. Esters came to Purdue in fall 2009, committed to mentoring others as productively as Bowen mentored him.

Research Focus: Esters' research focuses on the career development of racial and ethnic minority students pursuing education and work related to the STEM disciplines; the use of agriculture as a context for teaching and learning STEM; and the career development of students in urban agricultural education programs.

Applicability: "It's known that we haven't done well in bringing racial and ethnic minorities into the STEM pipeline," he says. "I want to contribute to developing strategies, interventions and programs that will help increase the number of students getting into that pipeline."

On MAP: Esters' passion for mentoring is evident in his involvement in the Mentoring at Purdue (MAP) program. Funded by a grant of the USDA Women and Minorities in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Fields program, MAP fosters effective mentoring relationships among graduate students and faculty members in the College of Agriculture through events, workshops and seminars. Esters believes MAP can emerge as the university's premier mentoring program.

Walking the Mentor Walk: Esters advises five graduate students and was recently successful in recruiting the first African-American female graduate student to his department. "I refer to myself as a mentor, rather than an advisor," he says. "And I tell my students, 'If you want to be average, that's fine, but I'm not in the business of developing average people. I'm in the business of developing people who are good at what they do.'" This same commitment to helping others reach their potential extends to his coaching youth sports in West Lafayette.