

**Using Service Learning to Engage First-Year
Undergraduate Students in Agricultural Education, Communication, and Leadership**

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Introduction

The 2016-2020 AAAE National Research Agenda (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016) identifies a need for meaningful, engaged learning in all environments. In a variety of settings, service learning provides an opportunity for such learning. Service learning engages students in an experiential setting while promoting student development, community engagement, and student learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000). An important aim of service-learning is to develop citizens with the knowledge and experience needed to solve a community's problems and issues (Speck & Hoppe, 2004). Bringle and Hatcher (1995) described service-learning as a credit bearing experience that is tied to a course in which students participate in. Service learning is explained as an organized service activity that will meet the needs of the community and as a result of this activity students should reflect on the activity to gain further understanding of course content, and gain an enhanced sense of personal value.

Within agricultural education, providing instruction to those unfamiliar with agriculture, food, and the environment is one way to fulfill an identified community need. According to the National Research Agenda (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016), there are a multitude of programs and curricular efforts designed to address this need. Nonetheless, it is estimated that these programs only reach approximately 2% to 12% of the school age population (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears). As such, additional efforts, such as the one described below, may prove beneficial to all involved.

How It Works

An introductory course (AGED 109) was created at a Midwest land-grant institution to welcome freshmen and transfer students in Agricultural Education, Communication, and Leadership. The course was designed to help students transition to a university setting and facilitate exploration of their academic major and career area of interest. Course content included academic success strategies, such as time management and goal setting, campus resources, academic planning and engagement. Additionally, the course included discipline specific topics such as career exploration, degree/certification requirements, professional development opportunities in education, communication, and leadership, and service learning activities.

Unlike many courses completed by first-year students, this course was designed as a small course, requiring high levels of student engagement. A key component of the course involved a group service learning activity conducted near the end of the semester. Specifically, students "try out" education, communication, and leadership skills by presenting an agriculture-related presentation to upper elementary classes or Boys and Girls Club participants.

To encourage connecting with new peers, students are randomly assigned to small groups, which range from two to four students depending on course enrollment. Once groups are assigned, students work together to identify an agricultural topic to focus on. Topic selection is guided by input from the school and community partners, course instructor, and [state] Ag in the Classroom coordinator. Student groups are asked to submit a Ag in the Classroom proposal document, which outlines the chosen topic and proposed objectives, aligned to [state] education standards.

Once approved, student groups move forward with planning the content and to assist students with this process, the [state] Ag in the Classroom coordinator delivers a presentation, highlighting resources and best practices that may prove beneficial when developing presentation materials. In addition to ready-made lessons and resources, students are introduced to the agricultural literacy curriculum matrix, an online, searchable curriculum resource for K-12 teachers. This resource crosswalks agricultural topics with national education standards in the areas of science, social studies, and nutritional education. Additionally, the course instructor provides a basic overview of the lesson-planning process, so that students have a better understanding of lesson components. For many students, this may be their first exposure to lesson planning and/or designing educational presentations.

The course instructor works with school and community partners to schedule presentations, each ranging from 30-45 minutes. With the schedule established, student groups work to finalize and fine-tune their presentations, delivering the presentations once to peers for mentoring and critique. Student groups are reminded about characteristics of effective teaching, and encouraged to be mindful about the amount of time spent “talking at” students as opposed to engaging them.

Results

Since 2011, nearly 50 student groups have presented agricultural presentations to elementary students and/or Boys and Girl Club participants in [community]. This effort has fostered collaborative relationships with community partners, provided interactive, agriculturally-based learning experiences for countless learners, and contributed to an increased level of comfort and interest in working with youth through teaching among students involved. One student offered: “I was very nervous heading into this experience and teaching a lesson to students... This experience allowed me to realize the importance of this profession”. Others shared excitement about the experience, stating “When we left the experience, all the students were very appreciative and thanked us for coming. It made me feel like I made a difference and learned a lot at the same time.” Yet another commented, “Students within our group were very talented and were eager to learn... This experience made me realize all the great things these students could do in a classroom.”

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Each yearly iteration of the service learning experience has proved valuable for all involved, although future plans would ideally allow student groups greater choice in selecting the setting they present in. Possible options could include a secondary agricultural education classroom, a day care, or 4-H youth organization. To date, minor changes have been made from year to year with regard to community partners, group member selection, and the range of topics allowed/approved. Such flexibility has been a key to success. Allocating time (in class) to address lesson-planning and available resources, as well as to practice delivery has been helpful in ensuring high-quality presentations.

Cost

Cost associated with the service learning activity has been quite low. Because presentations are relatively close to campus, students provide their own transportation. The main expense (roughly \$100 each year) has been purchasing supplies and materials for presentations. This funding is necessary so that students do not limit the selection of engaging activities based on cost.

References

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