

Auburn University Agriscience Education Immersion Experience: An Exploratory Program for
the Promotion and Improvement of Future Agriscience Teachers

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Introduction and Need

Innovation in the recruitment of potential teacher candidates is paramount for the continued livelihood of our profession. In 2016, state programs identified 721 (Smith, Lawver, & Foster, 2016) open agriculture education positions at the secondary level, while post-secondary programs strive to educate enough candidates to fill these positions. Post-secondary Agriculture Education programs have historically experienced enrollment, funding, and certification difficulties for future teachers (Smith, Lawver, & Foster, 2016). Auburn University has developed and initiated a summer immersion opportunity for the enhancement of personal development, leadership skill building, and recreational activities (Connors, Falk, & Epps, 2010) known as the Auburn University Agriscience Immersion Experience. This experience enables twelve schools to identify five potential students each to participate in a two-day teaching experience for the promotion of agriculture education. Four opportunities are held each summer with three schools participating in each program. This innovative program addresses Research Priority 5, “*How can quality agricultural leadership, education, and communication educational programs be delivered in a cost-effective manner?*” (Thoron, Myers, & Barrick, 2016, p. 43).

How it Works

Day one activities include immersion within the equine sciences, beef evaluation and management, poultry science and production, greenhouse management, production, and business operations, meat processing and evaluation, and veterinary science applications. *Day two* participants engage with Auburn University faculty to practice methods of instruction, classroom management, and the development of their teaching demonstrations utilizing the experience from the day one activities. Collaborative learning and experience is gained through student’s interaction with professors and faculty at each of the facilities. Each immersion activity concludes with a panel discussion with new teachers, financial aid professionals, and admissions counselors. The development and implementation of this program relies on support from the Auburn University Agriscience Program, College of Agricultural Science, Auburn University Veterinary College, and the College of Education. Alabama high school agriscience programs are eligible to participate in the two-day immersion programs. Each high school program completes an application and faculty and staff at Auburn University review the applications to determine acceptance. Once accepted, the secondary program agrees to participate and provides information regarding their students interest in becoming an agriscience teacher. This interest approach provides a means for tailoring a school’s experience to meet the needs and interest of the prospective teaching candidates. A registration of \$50.00 per participant (\$250.00/school) is collected in advance which provides funding for materials, lunch, subsidy for overnight accommodations, and t-shirt. The innovation of this activity, beyond the immersion experience, provides high school students the opportunity for reflection and conversation with Auburn University faculty. This discussion time provides insight from students interested in agriscience education for faculty to tailor future programs and programmatic recruitment efforts.

Results to Date

One pilot immersion program was completed during the summer of 2017 at Auburn University. One school and twelve participants experienced the immersion program and the

results were spectacular. Student participants expressed their excitement when asked about CDE experiences, teaching methods, and learning more in depth the requirements for being a successful agriculture teacher. Participants also were supportive of the overnight experience and the application of learned experiences in the agriculture mechanics laboratory. Teacher participants indicated their support and recommendation for broadening the program during the summer of 2018 and supplied their voice of support during statewide meetings. Auburn University faculty in the College of Agricultural Science supported the opportunity to share the benefits and successes of the college while demonstrating the authenticity of their individual programs and the need for agriscience teachers to have an understanding of the concepts and science applications. Faculty at the Auburn University College of Veterinary sciences have offered in-depth activities for future immersion experiences including; live surgeries, facilities management, and veterinary technologist experiences. The long-term outcomes of this opportunity will demonstrate if immersion opportunities for secondary students interested in agriscience education increase the enrollment, completion, and matriculation within our field.

Future Plans

The future of this innovative program involves expanding the number of secondary schools to twelve increasing participation through the addition of four separate immersion opportunities at Auburn University. During the summer of 2018, 70 students will have the opportunity to engage in the application of teaching and learning while gaining additional educational opportunities. The future for this program includes incorporating advisor professional development to run concurrently with the student immersion activities, increasing the number of undergraduate agriscience majors involved in direct instruction, and new content areas for student activities. Ideally, the inclusion of agriscience learning kits, curriculum development, training CDE teams, and public relations will be added to the experience as well as the opportunity for a three-day experience. Plans to maintain growth will be accomplished by limiting participation to junior and senior students and no more than one attendance per lifetime. This conclusion is supported by Brown, Terry, and Kelsey (2014) who supported limiting attendance of participants to alleviate facility stress and accommodate more future teachers who to attend and the potential for repetitive activities and experiences. Promotion of this program will occur through the 2017-2018 school year and consist of a one hour workshop about the immersion experience during the 2017 Auburn University Greenhand Conference.

Costs

Operating costs are offset by student registration being collected prior to each immersion experience. Four schools are involved in each immersion experience and thus generate a cost offset of \$1000.00/experience. Each participant is required, through their FFA program, to submit a \$50.00 registration fee to offset subsidized accommodation in Auburn, materials for activities, transportation between campus instructional units, and meals. Costs for this program vary between locations so approximate values are included for one immersion experience: Lodging for five students, \$450.00, meals, \$500.00, materials, \$350.00, transportation, \$100.00. Total net cost per immersion activity is \$1400.00, with \$1000.00 collected in registration fees, for a balance of \$400.00. Additionally, cost offsets from the College of Agricultural Sciences of (\$3000.00) and industry partnerships (\$5000.00) to reduce the financial burden.

References

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