

Grip and Grin: An innovative approach to incorporating advisory committee members into SAE instruction

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Introduction

Agricultural education employs a three-circle model in which students receive systematic instruction in the classroom/laboratory setting, engage in leadership training through the National FFA Organization, and gain contextualized experience in agriculture through the Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) program. Phipps, Osborne, Dyer, and Ball (2008) define an SAE program as consisting of “planned, sequential agricultural activities of educational value conducted by students outside of class and laboratory instruction for which systematic instruction and supervision are provided by their teachers, parents, employers or others” (p.438). Although it is an integral part of the agricultural education program, it has been reported that the number of students who begin and complete an SAE program has been decreasing (Rubenstein & Thoron, 2015) for a variety of reasons including resource availability, motivation, and communication between program partners. At Nonnewaug High School in Woodbury, Connecticut all students enrolled in agricultural education classes are required to maintain an SAE project in which they work a minimum of two hundred hours per school year. Although students from Nonnewaug’s program have been successful in completing high-quality SAE programs since the program’s inception in 1920, the agricultural education staff noticed that students were experiencing increasing difficulty in initiating an SAE project, especially placement projects. Simultaneously, SAE employers active on the program’s advisory committee described students demonstrating low awareness of appropriate job seeking behaviors and skills. In response to these observations, members of the program advisory committee developed a presentation for freshmen and sophomore agricultural education students called “Grip and Grin” which was first delivered in early spring 2015. These committee members created a PowerPoint presentation which was delivered to freshmen and sophomores regarding how to successfully find a job. In subsequent years, the program was revised to provide students individualized feedback from advisory committee members. The Grip and Grin program is now in the third year of implementation.

How it Works

Members of the agricultural education advisory committee collaborated with the agricultural education staff to identify key knowledge and skills which students needed to know to be successful in obtaining employment. Three of the advisory committee members who also served as current SAE employers spearheaded the effort to design the format of the Grip and Grin session and then subsequently delivered the program to freshmen and sophomore students enrolled in agricultural education. During the initial delivery in February 2015 topics covered in the Grip and Grin session included how to find a job, résumé development, job application and interview process, and relevant tax knowledge. At the conclusion of the PowerPoint presentation the three employers helped students practice professional introductions and handshakes. After the employers left, students crafted résumés in accordance to the guidelines and template provided to them, which were then graded by the agricultural education staff. In 2016, the program was revised so that the agricultural education staff (not the advisory committee members) delivered the Grip and Grin PowerPoint to only freshmen students. Additionally, agriculture education staff delivered the “You’re the Boss” lesson plan available from the National FFA Organization to help students prepare résumés prior to working with advisory committee members. A few weeks after developing these résumés and reviewing the Grip and Grin PowerPoint, six advisory committee members followed up with all freshmen during class time. During these follow up sessions students received individualized feedback on their résumés

from advisory committee members and also participated in mock phone interviews. These same advisory committee members presented a different presentation to sophomore classes on the same day. Instead of focusing on how to obtain a job, they focused on how to keep a job or how to change employment without burning bridges. The Grip and Grin program is now underway for the 2017 – 2018 year following the same design as the 2016 program.

Implications

The agricultural education staff reported students responding very positively to the feedback from advisory committee members, demonstrating increased awareness of appropriate employment behaviors, as well as increased confidence. Seevers and Rosencrans (2001) identified involvement of volunteers as “a way to broaden the knowledge base available to students and allow teachers to focus on other areas” and that their expertise should be capitalized upon whenever possible (p. 79). Incorporating members of the advisory committee who run an agricultural business allowed the agricultural education staff and students to benefit from direct industry experience, as well as creating more program buy-in for the members of the advisory committee. Furthermore, Rubenstein and Thoron (2015) suggested that teachers who provide school resources to students can help increase student participation in SAE programs. Implementing Grip and Grin can help other school-based agricultural education programs boost student participation and success in SAE. Sorensen, Lambert, and McKim (2014) identified “utilizing a local advisory committee” as a top inservice need of agriculture teachers with less than five years of experience. Implementing a program like Grip and Grin could provide structural support for beginning agriculture teachers unsure of how to use an advisory board. Finally, with the increased focus upon college and career readiness nationwide, the Grip and Grin program can foster development of employability skills necessary to develop college and career readiness within the context of school-based agricultural education.

Future Plans

Advisory committee members participating in the Grip and Grin program at Nonnewaug High School continue to be excited about the opportunity to share knowledge with agricultural education students as well as helping students develop skills to obtain a job. Agricultural education staff plan on continuing this very successful partnership so that future students can benefit from the Grip and Grin program. Currently all Grip and Grin efforts target freshmen and sophomore students, but the agricultural education staff are presently developing targeted instruction for junior and senior students to aid in the transition to life after high school.

Resources Needed

To implement this program, agricultural education staff should work with their local advisory committee to identify opportunities for committee members to share expertise with students. Providing students with one-on-one feedback requires these volunteers to attend school, and may mean incorporating their presence into the curriculum. Agricultural educators should collaboratively develop a lesson that best fits the needs of their particular students, community, and industry, drawing upon the feedback from these various stakeholders. The FFA Lesson Plan “You’re the Boss” which was used in the delivery of this program is available for free download at https://www.ffa.org/SiteCollectionDocuments/myjourney_build_youretheboss.docx.

References

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