

Using a Student Exchange Program to Foster New Agricultural Experiences for Students

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Introduction

Experiential learning has had a long history of being a foundational method of instruction in all components of the complete school-based agricultural education (SBAE) program (Baker, Robinson, & Kolb, 2012; Roberts, 2016). One common method of experiential learning in SBAE is through field-based experiences. High impact, field-based experiences encourage students to create new knowledge, connect concepts across curricula, and explore varying perspectives beyond their own (Murphrey, Odom, & Sledd, 2016). In post-secondary agricultural education, field-based experiences, such as travel abroad programs, have been shown to improve students' content knowledge of region-specific agriculture, increase students' sensitivity to other cultures, and grow students both personally and professionally (Bruening, Lopez, McCormick, & Dominguez, 2002). Providing SBAE students high impact experiences, such as traveling abroad, presents many learning opportunities, but is realistically challenging to implement. This innovative idea provided SBAE programs a cost-effective and sensible solution to meet this need. The *FFA Chapter Exchange* program partners two SBAE programs, which are located in different regions of the United States, to "exchange" students for a short duration.

How it Works

The Vernon-Verona-Sherrill FFA Chapter, located in New York, has organized a series of student exchanges across the nation. Each "exchange" is unique in design, but typically involves trading three to eight students with another SBAE program for a duration of three to eight days. The time of year the exchange occurs can vary according to the needs of the SBAE programs involved, but previous exchanges have taken place during the school year, during a break in the school year, and over the summer.

During the exchange program, each host chapter provides visiting students learning experiences within their region-specific agriculture and culture. Previous exchange programs have given students the opportunity to experience agricultural operations that are far different from those seen within students' home surroundings. Each host program is responsible for organizing activities that it deems to best represent the region and are responsible for any fees associated with the unique experiences. Host programs are also responsible for organizing sleeping arrangements. Past exchanges have used host families that agree to take-in visiting students for the duration of the experience.

Implications & Results to Date

To date, six student exchanges have taken place that included the states of Wisconsin, Tennessee, Connecticut, New York, North Carolina, and Florida. Each exchange has been highly successful in providing students unique and rich learning experiences that exposed them to region-specific agricultural operations and cultural diversity. Examples of learning experiences included having students tour or work within strawberry operations, citrus groves, peanut farms, large-scale cattle ranches, maple syrup operations, and urban agriculture. Most exchanges allowed students to be immersed in another SBAE program in which they were able to witness the diversity of agricultural education programs (e.g. membership characteristics, size, scope, focus). Previous exchange students reported that they created life-long memories and have

remained in close contact with their host families. Furthermore, some previous exchange students even reported that this experience was the first time in which they traveled outside of their home state. One student reported seeing the ocean for the first time, while another student reported visiting a farm for the first time. The exchanges allowed all participants to be exposed to people who were different than themselves. Being exposed to new experiences, exploring new areas, and working with new people, prepared students for the adult world.

Future Plans & Advice to Others

The Vernon-Verona-Sherrill FFA Chapter plans on continuing the *FFA Chapter Exchange* program. The chapter is eager to establish new collaborations with SBAE programs from areas around the country that are home to unique agricultural operations. Although each exchange program is designed specifically for the chapters involved, advice is offered that comes with experience in organizing and managing such programs. It is hoped that an exchange network is created that can expand the scope of this program to many chapters. It is suggested that exchanges be approached with caution. Ensure that school administration and parents from both schools fully understand what is occurring and approve the exchange. It may be helpful to offer administrators detailed itineraries, contact information, and permission slips. The use of technology, such as internet video calls, can allow students and parents to meet host families prior to travel. Having students make consistent contact (i.e. a daily phone call) with home during the exchange is also recommended. It is recommended by the researcher that programs require students to complete various reflection activities (e.g. daily journaling) during the experience to align with components of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). Lastly, the researcher recommends that further research be conducted that examines student outcomes from exchange experiences.

Costs & Resources

The cost of conducting an *FFA Chapter Exchange* can vary tremendously. Travel costs are usually the largest expense, especially if the exchange requires plane travel. The Vernon-Verona-Sherrill FFA Alumni has established a scholarship fund to offset students' travel expenses. As discussed above, the host chapter is responsible for costs associated with experiences they provide to visiting students. It is recommended that chapters take advantage of existing networks they have within their local communities to seek cost-effective activities. Host families are also a great resource to this program. It is recommended to find quality host families and to be very appreciative of their time and effort as they ensure that each student's experience is positive. Lastly, the most important resource is the other SBAE program in which the exchange occurs. Networking and establishing good relations with agriculture teachers throughout the nation can create many opportunities for future student exchanges.

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