

Navigating Careers: Recruitment Program For Early Career Educators

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Introduction

Since 2009, enrollment in teacher preparation programs across all content areas has dropped from nearly 725,518 to 465,536 in enrollment (Aragon, 2016). The shortage of school-based agriculture education (SBAE) teachers across the United States cannot meet the current demand to fill the open positions. Many of the open positions are because current SBAE are leaving the profession, expansion of existing programs, and the development of new programs. The shortage of school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers has been a concern since the 1920s, with data suggesting deterioration in the profession since the 1960s (Camp, 2000; Foster, Lawver, & Smith, 2016).

Growing efforts are focused on recruitment of qualified pre-service agriculture teachers (Ball & Torres, 2010). Many factors contribute to why students pursue careers in agricultural education. Factors that may influence the decision to teach may include prior teaching and learning experiences, the self-perception of teaching, and the intrinsic value of teaching agriculture (Marx, et. al., 2017). While many other factors contribute to why students are interested in teaching SBAE, there is a growing push for teacher preparation programs to develop a recruitment plan. Marx et. al., (2017) recommended that recruitment strategies target demographics related to agriculture through exposure of pre-service teacher programs. The University of Florida Agricultural Education & Communication (AEC) Department has created a comprehensive recruitment program that exposes students in SBAE programs to the pre-service teacher program.

How It Works

The recruitment program is composed of three main programs, which include the Agricultural Education Institute, the annual Teach Ag signing event, and the creation on the Florida Ag Ed Day. The first part of the recruitment program is the University of Florida Agricultural Education Institute, held at the FFA State Convention. The Agricultural Education Institute is a series of workshops where rising high school juniors or seniors who have an interest in pursuing a degree in agricultural education upon graduation may attend. The Agricultural Education Institute is hosted twice on campus- once in the fall and again in the spring. Students enroll by having their FFA Advisor register them for the Agricultural Education Institute. When students arrive at the convention, they will receive various academic resources, college preparation information about the AEC Department, and direct links to faculty within the department through a series of hands-on workshops. In the various workshops, students will have the opportunity to reflect on the impact that agricultural educators make on a daily basis. The students discuss the characteristics that make a great agricultural educator, while reflecting on the reasons why they are interested in the profession.

The second component of the recruitment program is the Teach Ag signing event, where students sign their letter of intent into the profession. Once students have signed their letter of intent and are “Tagged to Teach Ag,” they receive recognition on stage at the Florida FFA State Convention. The students that sign their letter of intent are invited to the University of Florida-Gainesville campus with the Agricultural Education Institute. These students will also meet twice over the next year- once in the fall and again in the spring. While on campus, students will meet with professors within the department to explore life on campus, look at what opportunities are available for students majoring in the Agricultural Education and Communication

Department, and look at how to be a successful candidate when applying to the University of Florida.

The third component to the recruitment program has been to modify the Agricultural Education Career Development Event (CDE). This CDE was started nearly five years ago, with the intent to provide students with the skills necessary to be an agricultural educator. In previous years, this CDE was held in conflict with a plethora of other CDE's, while not being hosted within the AEC Department. As part of the recruitment program, the University of Florida has collaborated with the State FFA staff to host the CDE with the help of faculty, staff, and current students. The Agricultural Education CDE is held in conjunction with the fall meeting for Agricultural Education Institute for the "Florida Ag Ed Day". When students come to compete on campus, the students are exposed to the opportunities that this career will have for them.

Results

The Agricultural Education Institute had nearly 125 participants at the last FFA State Convention, with growing numbers over the last several years. The past Teach Ag signing event included nearly 50 students signing their letter of intent to enter the profession. With revamping the Agricultural Education CDE towards the Florida Teach Ag Day, there has been an increase in participation in this CDE. Throughout the semester, we were able to have more participants join us on campus to visit the AEC Department. Therefore, we University of Florida faculty have been able to interact more with prospective students. Numerous past participants of the Agricultural Education Institute are now current students within the department at the University of Florida. While we cannot conclude that these programs have specifically impacted enrollment, the Agricultural Education cohort has jumped from 12 students to 32 students enrolled.

Future Plans

Over the next few years, the department aims to increase participation in each of these recruitment programs. The department would like to host past participants of these recruitment programs to speak with prospective students about the opportunities that are available to them at the University of Florida. Other plans include to increase more teacher buy-in into these recruitment programs, gather additional funding to expand these programs, and to work with National FFA create a national Agricultural Education CDE so that more students are encouraged to participate.

Resources Needed

The cost for implementing all three components of the recruitment program varies. Some costs associated with the program include travel expenses, time, and buying various workshop materials. The recruitment programs rely on support from agricultural educators and state FFA association staff in these efforts. The program is also grateful to have help from University of Florida faculty, staff, and graduate assistants to help with the recruitment programs.

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