

**When Three Become One, Impact of Three Academic Specializations Serving Students
Through One Academic Organization**

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Need for Innovation

Nationally, universities and colleges of agriculture have been called to break down the silos that often exist in academia (National Research Council, 2009). Silos can limit resources and opportunities, impede learning, and reduce relevancy. While often discussed at an academic department level, the silo effect can also be observed in student organizations. Often student organizations separate themselves based on their majors. This can leave student academic organizations with small membership numbers, a redundancy of campus events, and less communication amongst peers who are separated by their major but have overlapping of professional development needs. Additionally, siloed student organizations require substantial faculty time and service.

Among departments representing the agricultural education, communication, extension, and leadership disciplines, it is common to have several student organizations including Collegiate FFA, Collegiate 4-H, Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT), and other student organizations. Based on the symbiotic relationship already shared among these disciplines, there is an opportunity to break silos and combine efforts to reduce redundancy, improve relevance, capitalize on resources, and build community. Within our academic department we observed small membership numbers, a silo mentality among our students, and limited faculty time. Therefore, we combined forces and created a new student organization called, Agricultural Communicators, Educators, and Leaders of Tomorrow (ACELT). Members of ACELT, have the opportunity to share an appreciation for each of our diverse academic specializations and collaborate to grow their professional development skills and knowledge.

How it Works

Change is hard and breaking silos within student organizations should be done strategically and with compassion. As faculty, we first discussed how we could combine resources and faculty time to enhance student life and professional development through one organization. During this discussion phase we discussed how we could garner support from administration and students, the logistics of the organization, and how to remain sensitive to national organizations (e.g. National ACT) and unique difference between specializations.

Following our brainstorming and planning, we approached our administration to share our idea and gain approval and support. Our administration was very supportive given the benefits gained when breaking silos. To gather student momentum and support for a unified student organization we started sharing this new idea with students during their Introductory Department Seminar course. This is a seven-week course that first-year students in all department majors are required to take. The course allowed us to discuss the benefits of a combined organization, build excitement about continuing the community created in the class, and address any concerns. Additionally, targeting first year students who had limited knowledge of the prior student organizations was key in gathering momentum.

After gaining first-year student excitement, we examined student schedules and hosted an informational meeting during a time and day that would work for both first and second-year student schedules. During our informational meeting, we laid out the framework for the concept of what we as faculty/advisors would hope this organization could do for our students. We

shared a three-pronged vision, which included professional development, the opportunity to be a member of their industry-specific national student/professional organizations (Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow, National Association of Agricultural Educators, National Association of Extension 4-H Agents, etc.), and social and networking opportunities. We also encouraged student input on the focus of the new organization. As a result, we also added a community service component and expanded on other opportunities and events to appeal to all students and show the benefits of each major. To make the organization official from the university, we followed the university process for clubs, elected officers, drafted, approved, and submitted a constitution.

Results to Date

All students on our campus are invited to members of ACELT, but currently all members are studying one of the three majors offered in our department. We have first and second-year student members; however, much of the leadership and momentum has been garnered by first-year students. The students elected to set membership dues at a rate that would offset club expenses and assist interested students in paying for partial student/professional national organization dues. The organization officer team was also proactive in pursuing and successfully obtaining funds available from the university to support student organizations. These funds helped fund initial activities, national professional/student membership dues, and other professional development events.

During our first year as an organization, the membership hosted a mashed potato recruitment and professional development night, a professional development trip, EXCEL night, fundraiser, and assisted with [State] FFA Career Development Events (CDE). Through these activities, students developed team building skills, became more aware of inclusivity, learned and networked with industry professionals, enhanced their Microsoft EXCEL skills, and learned the value of serving others. Several of these events attracted and benefited non-members as well as members.

Future Plans and Advice to Others

In the coming year, our returning students will be instrumental in recruiting incoming students and continuing to gain momentum for the organization. It is important that a strong team of students assist in recruitment efforts and to help lead the club kick-off each year. The organization will participate in recruitment opportunities through our campus Welcome Week, and in our Introductory Department Seminar course. The students are also discussing a consistent rotation of activities and planning advertising and engagement strategies.

For others looking to break silos in student organizations, we recommend gaining administrative and student support. Additionally, we recommend providing the opportunity for students to still be involved in national organizations (e.g. National ACT). The continued involvement in the national organizations, allows students to have unique experiences while still being united among each other in the combined student organization. Lastly, we would advise targeting first-year students and allowing the club to grow with each consecutive year – allowing change to occur gradually.

Resources Needed

The resources needed are similar to those needed for any other student organization (advisors, meeting space, constitution, finances, etc.). However, to be successful a combined organization, such as this, must have buy-in and support from administration and students.

References

National Research Council. (2009). *Transforming agricultural education for a changing world*. Washington, D. C.: The National Academies Press.