

Experiential Learning through Agricultural Policy Curriculum Design

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Introduction/Need for Idea

The role of educators in the development of course curricula is essential for meaningful and competency based instruction, with content delivered through a multitude of engagement methods (Norton, 2019). Dewey's theory originated from the foundation of two learning styles, "traditional" and "progressive" education (Dewey, 1938). Evaluating the different learning styles for students could have a beneficial impact on information retention and student engagement. (Baker & Robinson, 2016). In order to educate independent, forward-thinking students to actively engage in their community and future professional career, the educational model should reflect those very engaging principles (Baker & Robinson, 2016). Dewey philosophized that students who learn through an educational experience are more inclined to retain the information compared to a traditional lecture approach (Dewey, 1938). Dewey postulated ". . . education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience. . ." (Dewey, 1938, p. 89). Kolb theorized that learning occurs cyclically with four distinct pillars, Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Thinking, and Active Experimentation. (Peterson & Kolb, 2018). Kolb's experiential process is comprehensive and describes four types of people who are classified as: Reflectors, Theorists, Pragmatists, and Activists. (Honey & Mumford, 1995). These four learning profiles represent a person's strengths and weaknesses at that point in the experiential learning cycle (Honey and Mumford, 1995).

To increase efforts towards building civic engagement, educators should target young adults and provide opportunities for students to engage with peers and community leaders (Bennion & Laughlin, 2018). Increased engagement could be elevated through educational experiences to encourage political enthusiasm by peaking early interests (Bennion & Laughlin, 2018). Kliever stated ". . . it is important to recognize ways that the discipline of political science can reimagine itself to include coherent civic engagement education subfield within the larger disciplinary structure" (Kliever, 2015, p. 203). Those in the agricultural community have identified that action for agricultural advocacy exists but admit that most lack the education and understanding to be active in legislation efforts (Radford, Morgan, & Brown, 2018). The agricultural economy is an essential area of policy development, considering a Farm Bill is presented and passed every five years, these agricultural issues are crucial (Featherstone, 2018).

Methodology/How it Works

A special topics course in Applied Agricultural Policy will combine agricultural leadership and policy to encourage and educate students to become more engaged in agricultural advocacy efforts. This course will better help students to develop a basic understanding of the legislative process, read and interpret legislation, engage in the policy development process, and foster professional development. This course will be available for graduate or undergraduate students who are enrolled at Tarleton State University, on the main campus. Course specifications include:

- The class will be 16 weeks long, two one hour classes each week
- The course objective is to educate students on agricultural and natural resource policy development, implementation and advocacy.
- The students will develop a basic understanding of the legislative process at the state level.
- Students will learn skills that prepare them to transition into a professional position in public policy including: reading and drafting bill summaries, develop white pages, and schedule and conduct constituent meetings.

The students enrolled in the course will have the opportunity to apply their learned knowledge through an experiential model. The creation of a final project that combines all of the objectives covered in the duration of the course will allow students to research their own agriculturally related issue, locate the corresponding legislation, brainstorm a solution, develop a white page, schedule an appointment with a legislative office. Additionally, students will present and advocate on behalf of their issue. Upon the conclusion of the legislative visit, students will reflect upon their experiences and make recommendations on how to improve the course for future students.

Results to Date/Implications

To date, there has been a positive response to the development and framework of the course. Contributions from a former congressman and other industry leaders were influential throughout the development stages of the curriculum. Guidance from the faculty members have been instrumental in transforming this curriculum from thought to implementation. Students pursuing a career path in agricultural policy have displayed a positively peaked interest in the course. Other colleges within the university have expressed interest in a collaborative effort to provide civic education to a multitude of students across majors. The need for this type of education has presented potential with the possibility of grants to be awarded.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Due to the popularity and positive results of this educational development, a demand exists for new and engaging ways to deliver civic curriculum. A potential variation of the course is in the planning stages to provide an experiential course model targeting the national political process providing the same engagement experiences as those experienced at the state level. Discussions have revealed that this course will benefit students seeking an internship in congressional efforts and provide a material knowledge base before embarking on that professional experience.

Cost

The projected costs associated with this class would be \$1,300 for the semester per student. When considering the total cost for the course, about \$1,000 is required to be enrolled in a class by Tarleton State University. This cost includes the price for the course and the expected university fees associated with the university. The remaining \$300 will be allocated to the students travel to Austin and overnight stay. Travel costs will include a car or van rental capable of transporting the amount of students enrolled in the course.

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