

Central State University LIFE: An Interdisciplinary Student Organization for Agriculture

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Introduction/Need for Innovative Idea

Engagement in campus activities is a way to get to know your peers, network, and give back to your campus community (College of St. Scholastica, 2017). Among university students, specifically African-American students, it is important to keep in mind that they want to see their norms, values, and ideas to be involved in their student organizations (Tinto, 1993). The campus at Central State University (CSU) is 98% African-American; therefore, this was essential to keep in mind when building this student organization on our campus. Engagement with peers of similar areas of study are common; however, pairing together different silos within academia can be powerful, if conducted properly (National Research Council, 2009). In fact, the National Research Council (2009) challenges academia to break down the barriers between disciplines in a manner that is intentional.

When CSU was conferred their 1890 Land Grant status in 2014 and added agriculture majors to their campus in 2016; it was clear there needed to be organizations for them to build a professional network and learn essential professional skills. This is the need that CSU LIFE sought to fill. LIFE stands for Leaders in Food and the Environment. This is an interdisciplinary student organization specifically for students studying and/or interested in agriculture. This club primarily provides service to the campus: community service programs, to educational programs to our campus and local school about agricultural topics. This club also provides members opportunities to engage with state and national organizations such as Ohio Corn and Wheat Growers, Ohio Soybean Growers, Ohio Agribusiness Association, Ohio Farm Bureau, Greene Farm Bureau, and Extension programs.

We determined that the student organization should serve these two purposes as many students at CSU were not connected to any conventional or production agricultural organizations. The students enrolled in the new majors were linked by their interest in learning about agriculture to improve their home communities. LIFE allowed two of the top needs/motivators of our students to be addressed. This also allowed for the requirements from Tinto (1993) that students will be more engaged in their campus when they perceive that they see their norms, values, and ideas reflected in their campus engagement.

How it Works/Methodology/Program Phases/Steps

To “kick-off” this new student organization, we provided a working dinner and met with all of the students studying agriculture that had an interest. We had a semi-structured strategic planning meeting with the students to determine the following: the mission of the organization, the vision of the organization, goals that students had for the organization and what members wanted to learn, determine what opportunities students wanted to offer through the organization, and determine the opportunities that students had interest in for themselves within the organization. This “kick-off” messaging created the ability for students outside the standard agriculture majors to feel that they could find a “home” in LIFE. Many students from humanities, social work, and psychology also attended the meetings and have been a key part of the leadership of this group.

After the initial “kick-off” meeting, we finalized our mission and vision, set a regular meeting schedule, elected leaders for the organization, and began communities within the organization for students to plan different types of activities or opportunities. Each student selected a committee to be engaged within or was elected to a leadership position within the organization. From there, students began developing the Program of Activities for the organization. The Program of Activities included educational trips, professional conferences, community service, and recreational activities. Students have been able to develop the Program of Activities to reflect student interests and goals for the organization. All of these innovative, meaningful programming events have been impactful to the results of this student organization.

Results to Date/Implications

Since the beginning of the organization in 2016, the group has grown from primarily university staff and an average of 4-6 students per meeting. In 2019 there were over twenty students attending each meeting, there is a full slate of leaders, and event goals have been met.

In 2016 only one or two students attended professional conference events. In 2019 the organization has had a huge uptick in attendance at professional conferences. Six students attended the National FFA Convention, ten students attended the Ohio FFA Convention, ten students attended the Ohio Farm Bureau Young Ag Professionals Conferences, two students attended the Ohio AgriBusiness Conference, ten students attended a Project WetTree training with the CSU Extension program, one student applied to attend the AFA Conference, one student joined the intern team for OhioCorn and Wheat and Ohio Soybean Growers, and more than 20 students have attended the Farm Science Review for the career fair and professional networking. In 2016 there was one service event on campus. In 2019 there were three recreational activities conducted for club members, two service events conducted for the campus, and one service event conducted for the community. In 2019 LIFE hosted an informational night to recruit new members, which was the first time for this event. 2020 programs were impacted by COVID-19.

Since the beginning in 2016 the participation has increased exponentially, from less than ten students to almost 30 students. Within these members, there are at least six majors represented, half of which are agricultural. Given this success, the implications that have been deduced from this success is that students want to guide the Program of Activities for their organization(s), incorporating student interest in programming for the organization, and utilizing connections with industry partners for networking have allowed this organization to grow and be successful. Best of all of these activities have addressed the need of our students to connect with agricultural professionals, and use their agricultural knowledge to serve their community.

Costs/Resources Needed

For this organization, the following costs/resources must be provided: transportation to/from events, donors/funds for meeting refreshments (roughly \$50), donations for professional organization memberships, and access to printing to create flyers to promote campus events. Driven students, interested faculty advisors, and engaged stakeholders were also needed to make this new organization successful in addressing the needs of CSU students.

References

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- The College of St. Scholastica. (2017). *The importance of community participation: why college clubs and organizations matter*. The Sentinel Blog.
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- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.