

**Grow Your Own!**  
**Minnesota's Internship Model to Retain Preservice Agricultural Education Students**

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### **Introduction/Need for Innovation**

Often the best solutions to pressing issues or the most creative ideas occur during informal conversation at conferences, while visiting with colleagues. This idea, designed to address the continued shortage of school-based agricultural educators, was no different. In 2014, a group of Minnesota Association of Agricultural Educators members came up with a unique idea after a full day of professional development at the National Association of Agricultural Educators Annual Conference. A Minnesota delegation meeting “after hours” found themselves discussing an ongoing issue, “How can school-based agricultural education (SBAE) recruit and retain teachers? How can we keep students in an Ag Ed program throughout their entire college career? How do we compete with agricultural industry, when they offer internships (and then careers) that entice college students with vehicles, iPads, and other incentives generally not offered in education?”

As the conversation continued, an idea emerged. What if we offered an agricultural education summer internship, intended to really “hook” a college student on the profession? With a few cocktail napkins and a pen, the group brainstormed. How many weeks would the internship be? How many hours a week? What would it pay? How could it be lucrative enough to compete with industry opportunities? Post conference, the Minnesota Agricultural Education Leadership Council (MAELC) and other state leaders began the task of identifying funds for the internship, designed to encourage university students to continue pursuit of a teaching degree in Agricultural Education. Funding was ultimately secured from agricultural business and industry sponsors to make the internship a reality.

### **How it Works/Methodology/Program Phases**

Each fall, the internship is advertised, targeting university students completing their freshman, sophomore, or junior year. Applicants must be Agricultural Education majors or have the intent to pursue teacher licensure. Preference is given to those with intentions to teach in [state]. Applicants are expected to be self-motivated, ambitious, and possess a strong desire to learn, must work well with youth and adults, be a strong communicator, and have a valid driver’s license and reliable transportation. Applications are submitted in early November, with interviews conducted and offers made prior to the end of the calendar year.

Offers made to interns are based upon 32 hours/weeks for 10 weeks. Each intern receives a salary of \$3750 and has Minnesota association dues paid. Once intern offers are accepted, staff review applications of school-based agricultural education teachers who applied to host an intern. Similar to how university teacher candidates are placed, program staff review intern and host teacher applications and make placements, considering experiences offered, geographical limitations of the interns, and personalities of both interns and host teachers.

Throughout the experience (completed between May – August), interns experience what it’s like to be a school-based agriculture teacher over the summer. Each intern helps out with chapter officer retreats, participates in Supervised Agricultural Experience visits, and assists with events at county fairs. Additionally, interns engage in activities, such as helping with school gardens, attending CASE workshops, creating career development event study binders, or developing curriculum, depending on their host teacher’s schedule and responsibilities.

All interns attend the Minnesota Association of Agricultural Educators Summer Conference as a paid component of the experience, with conference registration and lodging provided. Interns are encouraged to engage fully in the conference, participating in both professional development workshops and social activities, to build a network with SBAE teachers across the state. While at conference, interns meet as a group where they each present a short presentation on one aspect of their internship. This sharing of ideas allows the interns to learn about other summer programs, bringing back ideas to their host teachers, and filing ideas away for their own future programs.

### **Results & Implications**

Since the summer of 2015, Minnesota has hosted 36 interns and is currently hiring for the upcoming summer. Nearly 83% of the interns (19/23) have completed programs of study in Agricultural Education and become licensed have become SBAE teachers. Of the 19 teaching, a total of 16 (84%) teach in [State], even if they attended college out of state.

As the interns have transitioned from college into the teaching profession, many have shared how impactful the internship was to their commitment to teach. [Former intern] offered, *“This internship helped me understand building relationships with the students and teachers so I can have people to go to when I have questions. Additionally, I was able to see what a FFA program can look like throughout the summer to keep the students involved with the chapter.”* Others have stated how valuable being at the Minnesota Summer Conference was. Because of the networking opportunities, interns felt that they had an advantage during their first year of teaching having already made connections across the state.

### **Future Plans/Advice**

A former Minnesota leader always encouraged us to “Grow Our Own”. This was a reminder that as agricultural educators we have the obligation and responsibility of finding students who would make great teachers and encouraging them to become school-based agricultural educators. This internship program does just that and is a model that can be replicated by other states. The following recommendations are made for those interested: 1) begin with a small planning committee; 2) seek funding from foundations and/or industry supporters; 3) be selective about host teachers/schools; 4) allow flexibility in internship scheduling; and 5) enlist an internship coordinator, and 6) have structured reflection opportunities for interns.

One adjustment we have made since the inception of the internship program was an intentional shift to connect interns to host teachers earlier in May. This allowed interns to interact with more high school students, help with (or at minimum observe) the chapter banquet, and witness the transition from school-year schedule to summer schedule.

### **Costs/Resources Needed**

Per intern, total cost is less than \$4000, which could be adjusted based on internship duration. While your state may not have an obvious source for funds, likely the state association or FFA foundation could assist. Likewise, a local school district, or neighboring districts, could identify funds to host their own intern. Perhaps working with a post-secondary institution, internships could be offered for credit, in lieu of monetary compensation. As we look for innovative ways to recruit and retain school-based agricultural education teachers, this is one strategy to consider.