

Growing Agriculture Student's Professionalism through Experiential Learning

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

It has become increasingly important for agriculture programs to reinforce critical career skills such as understanding role in the workplace, setting realistic career expectations, communicating accurately and concisely, and building professional relationships (Crawford & Fink, 2020). Employers of agricultural communications students have indicated recent graduates could improve time management, professional ethics, critical thinking, and negotiations (Irlbeck & Akers, 2009). Based on this research, the agricultural communications and leadership program at the University of Arkansas has created and implemented a student-facilitated professional development seminar to reinforce critical career skills, improve student professionalism, and ensure career readiness. This innovative project supports Research Priority 3: Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce That Addresses the Challenges of the 21st Century as specified in the National American Association for Agricultural Education National Research Agenda (Roberts, et al., 2020).

How It Works

All agricultural communications and leadership majors at the University of Arkansas complete a professional development course. Topics covered through formal instruction included career tracks, resumes, portfolio development, interview skills, professional ethics, critical thinking and professional dress. Additionally, students completed an experiential learning activity where they were assigned to two-person teams and were tasked with identifying, scheduling, and hosting a seminar speaker for the course to present on a professional topic. Office dynamics and professionalism, social etiquette, networking, negotiation, and job search strategies were some of the topic options outlined by the instructor and teaching assistant to guide students.

Seminars could be in-person or via video conferencing, as the course was offered in a hybrid format during the fall 2020 semester. Student teams were required to arrange the logistics for the seminar, introduce the speaker, lead post-seminar discussion, and follow-up with the professional after the seminar. The student-facilitated seminars addressed benefit and salary negotiations, dining etiquette, networking in-person and virtually, job search engines, how to present one's self on social media, corporate culture, entrepreneurship, continuing education (i.e., graduate school), office dynamics and professionalism, changing career paths, work-life balance, and innovative work settings.

This seminar activity was a practical experience for students and follows Kolb's Model of Experiential Learning (Kolb, 1984). At the beginning of the semester, the first seminar was coordinated by the instructor to allow students to learn about professional topics prior to their own engagement in the experiential activity. The process of working with partners to plan and host a seminar provided the students with a concrete experience on which to focus. They reflected on the concepts they had previously learned in the course related to professional networking and professional interpersonal communications skills (such as telephone and email etiquette). Abstract conceptualization occurred as they developed new ideas for their seminars and/or refined their plans for hosting. Finally, as they developed plans for contacting and recruiting speakers, the active experimentation stage of Kolb's model occurred.

To guide students through the experiential learning cycle, students were required to communicate the context of the course and the chosen seminar topic to the speaker and

collaborate with the speaker to decide on a method of presentation (e.g., a live interview, a panel discussion, or a formal presentation). Students further engaged in active experimentation as they moderated the presentation and facilitated a question-and-answer session at its conclusion. After the seminar, more reflection occurred, as the students were required to describe their experiences in a weekly blog post.

Results to Date

This approach allowed students to work with peers, grow their professional network, practice their professional interpersonal communications skills, and strengthen their organizational skills. Activities like this are imperative to improving students' "soft" skills, which employers have identified as lacking among college graduates (Crawford & Fink, 2020). Recent student course evaluation comments demonstrated students were aware of the value of the assignment:

I love this class and I think everyone at the university should have to take this class. It helped me go to the next level professionally. I learned great skills, not ones just to help me pass the class. Very real-world. I have enjoyed this tremendously.

During the semester, I improved my professional development, public speaking, writing and leadership skills and professionalism.

Furthermore, benefits extended beyond the students to the program and presenters. The activity was an excellent way for the academic program to continue relationships with alumni and supporters. The flexible format allowed greater diversity in the speakers instead of those just within commuting distance. Additionally, many of the guest speakers had internships and job positions available. Therefore, this activity showcased students' skills and demonstrated professionalism, which served as a networking experience for potential internships and jobs.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

This experiential activity will be integrated into future course offerings with a split between face-to-face seminars and those delivered via video conference. This is an important component to maintain the diversity of speakers and allow students to connect with experts from their personal networks. Additionally, topic options will be updated based on current data about employer expectations and reported deficiencies of new college graduate employees.

Students were hesitant to ask questions of speakers, so instructors should be prepared to support students through this process or appoint a student discussion facilitator. Others implementing similar experiential learning activities would benefit from teaching video conferencing etiquette prior to seminars including keeping cameras on, listening actively, using the chat or raise hand feature during presentations, and describing appropriate dress.

Costs/Resources Needed

Minimal costs were incurred. Stipends and travel expenses were not provided to seminar speakers, but may be required depending on the location of your institution. A quality camera, microphone, and video conferencing account are necessary for the seminars delivered face-to-face. As a response to COVID-19, all University of Arkansas classrooms now have the needed technology, but upgrades may be required in the future.

References

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