

Gauging and Growing Gen-Z Student Interest in Agricultural Education and Leadership at  
University of Missouri

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### **Introduction/Need for Idea**

High school student visits to university campuses ended abruptly during 2020-2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This was alarming, particularly because incoming college students identify campus visits as the most impactful source of information when deciding to attend a particular university (Cletzer et al., 2022; Rocca, 2013). In addition to providing a general feel for a campus, visits afford students contact with faculty members and current students, both of which are reported as influential on college choice (Alston et al., 2020, 2019; Cletzer et al., 2022).

The Covid-19-induced moratorium on campus visits allowed faculty at University of Missouri's Agricultural Education & Leadership (AEL) program time to reconsider our campus visit structure and be more purposeful in our recruitment efforts. AEL faculty opted for a one-day, all-day event for high school students when campus reopened in the fall 2021, which we dubbed the AEL Showcase. The purpose of the event was to highlight the AEL degree program and emphasis areas. Drawing on recent literature related to Gen-Z students' college decision-making processes (e.g., Alston et al., 2020; Cletzer et al., 2022; Loveland, 2017; Mohr & Mohr, 2017; Rickes, 2016), we hosted an event focusing primarily on opportunities after graduation, how our program prepares a student for employment, and return on investment. We were particularly interested in showcasing career options that demonstrated the versatility of our emphasis areas: teacher certification and communications and leadership. Prospective students are not always aware of career opportunities available in the broad and diverse field of agriculture (Baker & Abrams, 2011). The goal of the showcase was to expose students to career paths and opportunities in all facets of agricultural education, communications, and leadership while simultaneously raising awareness about opportunities at [Program] and how our program would prepare them for career success.

This innovative project addresses American Association for Agricultural Education Research Priority 3.2: "What methods, models, and practices are effective in recruiting agricultural leadership, education, and communication practitioners and supporting their success at all stages of their careers?" (Roberts et al., 2016).

### **How It Works**

The AEL Showcase was designed using social cognitive career theory (SCCT) as a program theory (Lent et al., 1994). SCCT states that learning experiences influence self-efficacy expectations and outcome expectations. These factors then further influence students' interests, goals, and actions. Learning experiences, such as AEL Showcase, could potentially impact students' career decisions. Some highlights of the day included:

- An AEL professor facilitated "Teaching Ag in Action." This workshop gave participants an inside look at what it might be like to serve as a school-based agricultural educator (SBAE). Participants took part in a strawberry DNA extraction lesson, an active learning approach to learning about biotechnology. Additionally, participants discussed the new federal law requiring labeling of genetically engineered foods that would come into effect Jan. 1, 2022.

- Two faculty members in the AEL program facilitated “Communications in Action.” This workshop focused on helping students clearly communicate their newly acquired information about biotechnology. Participants were tasked with designing and recording a podcast about agricultural technology and the new food labeling regulations. Students worked in teams to create their podcasts and utilized Anchor podcast hosting technology.
- Selected University of Missouri AEL students hosted “RISE - Power Hour” for participants. These university students facilitated round table discussions with participants about four important opportunities within the college: research, international study, service, and experiential learning. They also explained to participants how these experiences had supplemented their classroom education at University of Missouri.

### **Results to Date**

Participants included 24 high school students (18 female, six male) from 15 different high schools. The group included one sophomore, seven juniors, and 16 seniors. Each of the 24 participants demonstrated their ability to synthesize information and communicate about biotechnology and food labeling by planning and recording podcasts. Additionally, participants responded to a retrospective post-program survey at the close of the event. Results indicated:

- 100% of participants intend to pursue post-secondary education after high school
- 46% of participants plan to study agricultural education, communication, or leadership at University of Missouri
- 100% of participants would recommend or strongly recommend this event to a friend

All participants agreed, or strongly agreed, that the activities were engaging. We can also conclude they found the content to be engaging and worthwhile. These results also help us understand the demographics of the students who attended the AEL Showcase. In the future, we plan to track students who enroll in our department to see if they attended the AEL Showcase as a high school student. It is important to determine if this event is influencing participants’ career and college decisions.

### **Future Plans/Advice**

Future plans include conducting longitudinal research to understand how the AEL Showcase learning experience informs high school student participants’ college choice decision-making process. This research is important to ensure that events designed to help students make both college choices and career decisions are working as intended and yielding their intended long-term outcomes.

Additionally, perceived social status and other demographic factors impacts students’ exposure to learning experiences outside of the classrooms (Thompson & Dahling, 2012). There is a need to explore and address barriers that may be prohibiting all students access to learning experiences, such as the AEL Showcase.

### **Cost/Resources Needed**

The total cost of this event was \$720. While the main cost was meals for participants, approximately \$50 was spent on workshop supplies. The program and college provided students with a travel mug and small promotional items. Students all had access to the technology necessary to create their podcasts via cell phone.

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