

**The Evolution of Competition: Adapting an Agricultural Communications Career
Development Event for a State FFA Association**

Amador G. Gonzales, Graduate Student
New Mexico State University
505-426-5107
agg97@nmsu.edu

Alan Parker, Undergraduate Student
New Mexico State University
575-635-0229
parkeral@nmsu.edu

Shannon L. Norris-Parish, Assistant Professor
New Mexico State University
575-590-0030
norriss@nmsu.edu

Lacey N. Roberts-Hill, Assistant Professor
New Mexico State University
806-332-9974
lnroberts@nmsu.edu

Russell H. Walter, Executive Secretary
New Mexico FFA Association
575-646-7054
rwalter@nmsu.edu

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Introduction

Career Development Events (CDEs) are a component of the National FFA Organization's programming that enable students to acquire career development and personal growth skills in a competitive setting (National FFA Organization, 2022). Previous research has found that participating in CDEs impacts agricultural education students' likelihood of choosing agriculture-related careers (Lundry et al., 2015). Agricultural educators are encouraged to promote student development opportunities, such as CDEs, to help students build on career-specific skills taught in agricultural education classrooms (Goodwin & McKim, 2020). One such CDE available for participation is in the field of agricultural communications. The national Agricultural Communications CDE was initially proposed during the 69th National FFA Convention (Hamilton, 1996), with board approval coming a year later (National FFA Organization, 1997) and the inaugural event taking place at the 73rd National FFA Convention (Bishop, 2000). The national competition in 2021 had 28 states participating (National FFA Organization, 2021).

Before 2022, New Mexico did not have a state-level Agricultural Communications CDE. Because a career in agricultural communications necessitates proficiency in a variety of skills, including writing, editing, video production, web design, and photography (Corder & Irbeck, 2018), an Agricultural Communications CDE covers all of these topics and is designed to prepare students for careers in this field. A collaborative partnership between agricultural education and agricultural communications may teach critical skills and ideas to boost current programs and increase students' job readiness when entering the profession (Tucker et al., 2003).

How it Works

Using the National Agricultural Communications CDE guidelines, we created an Agricultural Communications CDE for the New Mexico FFA Association. Before the competition, teams developed a media strategy for a scenario taken from the National FFA Organization. Following the submission of the media strategy by the deadline, all teams created a presentation to be delivered at the New Mexico FFA Convention. Following the presentation of the media strategy, all members of the teams took a knowledge-based exam derived from the book *Agricultural Communication in Action: A Hands-On Approach* (Telg & Irani, 2011), in which a select number of chapters from the text, chosen on an annual rotating basis, served as the source for questions asked, as opposed to the national event, which tested the whole book.

Competitors also completed individual editing exercises based on journalistic and writing techniques. In a significant departure from the national-level event, instead of teams completing all media-based practicums individually in a single year (Journalistic Writing, Web Design, Opinion Writing, and Video Production), each separate practicum is to be introduced over a period of several years. Furthermore, instead of assigning team members to complete a specific practicum separately, all competitors completed the assigned practicum independently. Utilizing this rotational phasing will allow more time for teams to prepare for the event and introduce the curricula into the state programming. In addition, we designed the contest to engage students in events at the New Mexico FFA Convention by having participants attend the visiting state officer workshop to complete the assigned practicum, which the national contest does not do. We calculated the points and determined the final ranking of teams after completing all contest components.

We also organized three training sessions for the event in the spring before the state competition to give resources to teams throughout the preparation phase. These training sessions focused on contest elements, skills required for completion of each practicum, and teaching tips for instructors and teams to train in practical communication components.

Results to Date

The first Agricultural Communications CDE occurred during the 2022 New Mexico FFA Convention. Three teams participated, while students from five to six more chapters attended the live events to take notes for the following year. Judges, scoring officials, and event superintendents were agricultural experts and New Mexico State University faculty and students. Participants, agricultural educators, and scoring officials expressed satisfaction with the event, describing it as engaging, innovative, and challenging. Several agricultural professionals who assisted in judging the event remarked on the importance of the targeted abilities. One professional stated, "I used [the written and media plan] skills every day in my job. All students, regardless of having a title in communications, should receive a background in how to do these skills." Following the event, numerous educators requested personal training opportunities to develop communication units in their courses and prepare students for next year's event.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

We anticipated fewer teams to participate since 2022 was the first year the Agricultural Communications CDE was held in New Mexico. However, we hope to grow the contest and boost awareness of possibilities in agricultural communications careers. Furthermore, we will progressively incorporate the other practicums into the event, allowing teams to better plan and prepare over a longer period. We recommend establishing training opportunities for all teams to aid with teaching these skills in the classroom and through the contest to improve these skills. A balance between agricultural communications and education themes may be created by providing extra training opportunities, and a collaborative partnership can be formed (Tucker et al., 2003). Integrating agricultural communications curriculum and resources into current agricultural education programs, such as a CDE event, will spark interest in future jobs in the industry while also improving abilities in specific content-based areas (Pennington et al., 2015).

We also recommend that practicums be introduced progressively rather than taking place simultaneously with no previous training when introducing the event to a state with no prior Agricultural Communications CDE. Gradual exposure to these practicums will assist chapters in planning how to teach these skills to students. Incorporating a live component of the state FFA convention, such as a visiting officer workshop, CDE/LDE presentations, or state officer retiring addresses, into the event can help students apply concepts in a practical context.

Resources Needed

Under the guidance of instructors and state FFA staff, postsecondary agricultural education students organized the event and created the materials. Every year, a 25-question multiple-choice test and an editing exercise should be made using current resources (Telg & Irani, 2011). Developing scenarios for rotating practicums and media plan presentations, as well as finalizing judges and scoring officials, should be completed before the event. All tangible awards (i.e., plaques, banners, etc.) were financed and provided by the New Mexico FFA Association at the cost of \$125. Access to electronic equipment (computers, Adobe software, video equipment, etc.) is another expense related to the event's practicums.

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