INNOVATIVE

Providing Agriculture Training to Veterans: The VAEAP Project in the Southwest

Introduction

The Veterans Agricultural Education and Apprenticeship Program (VAEAP) in the Southwest is a program designed to help returning military Veterans enter and sustain successful careers in agriculture. Hands-on and immersive training experience has been identified as a critical strategy to help returning military Veterans enter and sustain successful careers in agriculture (Donoghue et al., 2014; Ahern et al, 2015; Fleming; 2015; Considine et al., 2017). The long-term/overarching goal of this program is to increase the number of military Veterans pursuing successful careers in food, agricultural and green industry sectors through a comprehensive, hands-on, and immersive training program (Fusaro, 2010; Rowe, 2014; Shue et al., 2021) jointly provided by the [ORGANIZATIONS] and several [STATE] farms, food hubs, and nursery/landscape businesses. The program seeks to increase the Veteran's access to Federal, local, and/or private grants/loans by providing grant application/administration assistance. In addition, the program offers therapeutic healing to Veterans through farming, animal caring, and green industry practices.

The main objectives of the program are as follows: (1). To increase the number of military Veterans pursuing knowledge and skills development that lead to successful careers in the food, agriculture, and green industry sectors; (2). To assist Veterans in securing meaningful employment opportunities that strengthen rural economies across the Southwest; (3). To increase the Veteran's access to Federal, local, and private grants/loans by assisting with grant application and administration; and (4). To offer therapeutic healing to Veterans through farming, animal caring, and green industry practices. This program was funded by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) for three years. After three years, the success and viability of the program will be examined to determine the potential for future funding or opportunities. Participants of VAEAP are returning military veterans interested in getting into the agricultural industry. Participants able to commit to the workshop schedule and internship. period. The program requires a minimum of twelve credits to graduate (non-transferrable to other educational institutions).

How it Works

Our project engages the project participants based on three Laws of Learning (McCormick 1984) and Domains of Learning (Wilson, 2022). The Cognitive Domain (Knowledge), Psychomotor Domain (Skill), and Affective Domain (Value) are used to engage program participants. The more senses employed in educational experiences the greater the percentage of retention of material. When students are satisfied with their learning experiences the more value they place on their experiences.

Methodology

This project was funded by a USDA grant for three years. Recruitment of program participants is by social media and veteran service organizations, and word-of-mouth from Veteran farmers and producers. Online interviews set up with potential program participants by program coordinators. University professors and program staff participated in interviews. Followed by online webinar orientations. Participants are contacted by email of scheduled workshops, online classes, tours, demonstrations, and presentations. To date, topics of workshops/demonstration/tours included: Encouraged to complete an internship experience with one of eight participating cooperating farm, or local producer

The program includes a curriculum of online classes (plant horticulture, agribusiness topics, solar PV & drone technology) which are designed to be self-paced and flexible. Each class is 1 to 2 hours long. Participants can continue working full time or attend classes at another educational institution while completing online classes for the VAEAP. Eight credits of online classes are required to complete the program, with each class being worth 2 credits. However, participants can choose to take additional classes if interested. Online classes are completed within four to six weeks. The classes include online lectures, virtual discussion sessions with the professors, and field trips and farm tours. There are online discussion groups and forums so that students work together and develop their networks. Topics include bed prep/seeding, plant propagation, solar PV systems, drone piloting, vermicomposting, orchard management, rainwater harvesting, hoop house construction, drip irrigation installation, hydroponics production, processing/cleaning vegetable products, greenhouse production, grain milling, mushroom production, marketing, direct to consumer sales, and restaurant sales. Eight farms/food hubs are serving as cooperating internship locations. All workshops and tours include a luncheon.

Implications

To date, we have a total of 40 program participants with 38 still engaged. Our program retention rate is 95%. Over 20 workshops/fieldtrips/tours have been conducted to date. A minimum of two per month are conducted. During the Pandemic, there were no face-to-face experiences. Eight participants are engaged in internship experiences, six participants have complete internship experiences. Two are scheduled for summer 2022. Feedback from participants is positive and includes suggestions for future topics.

Recommendations/Advice to Others

To date, our Veteran participants are engaged in the program and express satisfaction with the experiences. We see very few dropouts. The combination of online learning and in-person presentation (Cognitive Domain), and live demonstrations and hands-on activities (Psychomotor Domain), coupled with tours, provide opportunities for networking, interaction, and understanding (Affective Domain). Email communication and social media posting are effective tools to disseminate information and announce monthly activities. Social events promote Evaluations of Veteran experiences reveal participant levels of satisfaction with our program.

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