

Communicating agriculture to the public: A conference for high school agriculture students

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Introduction/Need for Innovation or Idea

Prospective university students are not always aware of career opportunities available in the broad and diverse field of agriculture (Baker & Abrams, 2011). In an era where trends regarding university student entrance, retention, and graduation as key indicators of institutional successes and failures are being highlighted (Adams-Johnson et al. 2019), it is important incoming students are well informed about agricultural careers so they can make informed major choices. Agricultural Communications is a fast-growing segment of agricultural education (Telg and Irani 2011) which can connect students to numerous career opportunities in agriculture.

Agricultural Communications is an emphasis area of the Agricultural Education and Leadership Program offered at the University of Missouri. University of Missouri Agricultural Education and Leadership (AEL) developed a one-day outreach event- *Communicating Agriculture to the Public*- with the goal of developing skills and motivating high school students to explore career paths in agricultural communications. Additionally, we aimed to raise awareness about opportunities at University of Missouri and provide an opportunity for high school students to network with agricultural communications professionals from across the state. 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/methodology/program phases/steps

Communicating Agriculture to the Public was hosted in a large high school located in the south central part of the state- a location that doesn't have easy access to events offered on the university campus. The local high school agriculture teacher assisted with space reservations, meal planning, and facility coordination.

On the morning of the early fall event, University of Missouri undergraduate and Master's students set-up for *Communicating Agriculture to the Public* an hour before high schoolers were due to arrive. Registration opened at 9:30 a.m., with an undergraduate University of Missouri student delivering greetings 30 minutes later. An opening address delivered by a agriculture broadcasting/communications professional officially kicked off the morning.

At the conclusion of the opening session, the 80 high school students were divided into one of four randomly assigned breakout groups. Each high school student breakout group attended three 30-minute-long workshops. Workshop sessions included the following: “Event Planning, Finding Your Voice”, “Creating Newsworthy Content”, “Policy Communications”, and “Social Media and Photography”. Workshop presenters included communications professionals from Missouri Farm Bureau, a commodity group, a national agricultural publication company, an agricultural broadcasting organization, a private agriculture company and the University of Missouri. Each breakout group was assigned one or two university students

who guided participants from room to room, facilitated questions, built connections with the high school workshop attendees.

The morning workshops were followed by a luncheon and remarks from the sponsoring commodity group. At the conclusion of the meal, an agriculture industry panel was moderated by university students. The student moderators directed the panel discussion toward two topics: 1). pathways and processes to achieve a career in agricultural communications, and 2). the future of agriculture communications. A reflection activity led by university students helped solidify learning from the speakers and breakout workshops, and the day concluded with closing remarks from a past national FFA officer. After adjournment, participants received “swag” to take home, as well as University of Missouri photo backdrops where students could take pictures.

Results to date/implications

The fall of 2022 was the first time for our department to host an event like this away from the University of Missouri campus. During this inaugural event, there were 80 students in attendance, from all grades 9-12. Two Agricultural Education & Leadership university faculty members were present, along with 7 undergraduates and 3 master’s students. Eight presenters spoke on behalf of 5 agricultural organizations, all either based in or have significant holdings in [STATE]. Incorporating an evaluation plan which aligns with our program objectives will be critical for future success of the event. With a goal of continuous improvement, we have plans to design and implement a Qualtrics survey to collect feedback on strengths and challenges at the conclusion of next year’s event. Additionally, a system should be implemented to track the number of student participants who go on to attend the University of Missouri and/or major in a communications-related field.

Future plans/advice to others

One critical component of planning for our event was utilizing existing partnerships to source presenters and sponsors and to find a hosting school. Our future plans include rotating the conference to high schools in different regions of the state so that it is accessible to students that might not normally attend an event on the university campus due to transportation challenges. In the future, we also plan to allow students to rank their workshop choices when they register so their conference experience can be better tailored to participants’ specific career interests. We also found that hosting an event early in the school year makes registration particularly challenging. We recommend others who consider implementing similar recruitment events carefully consider the academic calendars of both the university and high schools in the state.

Costs/Resources Needed

AEL spent less than \$100 on miscellaneous supplies including workshop materials, candy for students, promotional materials and presenter gifts. Mostly, these items were sourced from inventory already on hand. The lunch was sponsored by a state commodity organization who also presented at the conference. All presenters and student helpers were volunteers, and the facility was reserved by the partnering FFA chapter.

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