

Analyzing Graduate Student Member Benefits and Challenges within Agricultural Education,  
Communication, and Leadership Professional Organizations

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## **Introduction/Need for Research**

Professional organizations have been part of the agricultural education profession since the early 1900s (Connors, 2021). Membership in these organizations has been promoted as a critical career development component (Cottrell et al., 2009). Graduate students (GS) are important members of these organizations and develop skills that will benefit their future careers (Desmond & Symens, 1997). This study investigated GS member benefits compared to the general members within organizations in the agricultural education, communication, and leadership discipline (AECL). This study aimed to determine the membership roles of GS members in six organizations representing AECL and compare GS member benefits.

## **Conceptual or Theoretical Framework**

Participative leadership (PL) encourages organizational leaders to include employees in decision-making processes (Wang et al., 2022). Leaders can build a dynamic environment when employees are involved in decision-making (Wang et al., 2022). When leaders adopt a PL style, employees are encouraged to continue the organization's success (Huang et al., 2006). The participatory style provides a sense of ownership and makes members feel responsible for the organization (Wang et al., 2022). It is critical that all members feel a sense of ownership. GSs can contribute to the organization's continuation and success by participating in decision-making processes. GSs who engage early in their career will likely continue their membership and service long after graduate school (Escoffery et al., 2015).

## **Methodology**

A content analysis approach was used that focused on selected organizations' constitutions, bylaws, and websites. A convenience sample within the AECL discipline was selected for this study: American Association of Agricultural Education (AAAE), Association of Communication Excellence (ACE), Association of International Agricultural and Extension Education (AIAEE), Association of Leadership Educators (ALE), National Agricultural Communication Symposium (NACS), and North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture (NACTA). The constitutions and bylaws were obtained from the organizational websites. Researchers created a codebook and code sheet to review membership levels, benefits, and ability to participate in organization functions. Inductive coding allowed researchers to determine codes surrounding membership, dues, GS, and member roles. Validity was ensured through in-depth descriptions from the code sheet, audit trails, and researcher positionality (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **Results/Findings**

Considerable differences regarding GS membership were found. Table 1 shows significant factors that are different, such as graduate student membership costs, the ability of GS voting

rights, the ability to run for or hold a leadership position, and the designated representation of graduate students on a board of directors. GS members in two organizations do not have the right to participate in organizational operations. ACE allows these members to vote but not the opportunity to seek office. Three organizations allow members to vote and seek a leadership position, with two designating a seat on their board specifically for a GS representative.

**Table 1. Graduate Student Membership Benefits**

<b>Organization Name</b>	<b>Graduate Student Dues</b>	<b>The Right to Vote on Official Business</b>	<b>Ability to Hold Office</b>	<b>Graduate Student Representative on Board of Directors</b>
NACTA	\$25	No	No	No
AAAE	\$30	No	No	No
ACE	\$80	Yes	No	No
ALE	\$50	Yes	Yes	No
AIAEE	\$73.50	Yes	Yes	Yes
NACS	\$75	Yes	Yes	Yes

### **Conclusions & Implication**

The organizations we evaluated offer GSs networking and educational opportunities, yet obstacles may prevent GSs from joining. Half of the organizations' dues for GSs fall above \$50, which could financially burden those with limited monthly income. Four organizations offer GSs more significant benefits that align closely with the general membership. Two organizations do not provide GSs with opportunities outside of attending national conferences. The advantages of voting and holding leadership positions may encourage GSs to apply for membership. Organizations that involve GSs in decision-making use a participative leadership approach and provide a sense of ownership (Wang et al., 2022). When organizations allow GSs to partake in the organization, it shows them that the organization is invested in them and wants them to be involved (Myers, 2022).

### **Recommendations**

Based on the results, several recommendations can be made. For practice, organizations should establish a special committee to investigate GS membership and rights within their organizations and be given the opportunity to be represented within leadership. This would allow GS voices to be part of decision-making processes within organizations. Future studies investigate GSs sense of belonging within these organizations and the impact that GS representatives have when serving in a leadership role. Member satisfaction surveys should be deployed on a regular basis to best understand organizational buy-in and member engagement.

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