

Engaging and Educating Agricultural Educators through In-State Study Experiences

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Introduction/Need for Idea

As FFA members, we can all recite the words of the FFA Creed, however, today many of our students pursuing agricultural-related degrees do not come from farms or have the agricultural background knowledge that the creed describes. For students majoring in Agricultural Education or Extension, this background knowledge is incredibly important as they embark on careers that ultimately will place them in situations where they are leading classrooms and programs specifically focused on agriculture. While students enroll in university courses and many contain labs, these experiences often only offer a glimpse into the real-world component. Immersive experiences with farms, ag ed programs, Extension programs, and agricultural industries allow students to connect content knowledge with real-world opportunities and perspectives that can be integrated into extension programming and curriculum development. Immersive field trips provide an experience that is unattainable within the classroom while strengthening them personally and professionally (Bruening et al., 2002). Further, it is important that the most up-to-date agricultural practices are known and future educators share these experiences with their students (Luckey, 2012).

How It Works/Methodology/Program Phases

After generating the idea to develop an in-state study experience, team leaders researched grant opportunities that were available to support a fall break study tour. The team applied and secured funding through the North Carolina Tobacco Trust Fund grant program to support the extended field trip experience and cover the majority of the costs for students. It was important to secure funding that supported almost all costs so as to not prohibit students from attending due to financial constraints. The group selected fall break as the time for the trip to avoid conflict with popular spring break excursions or summer study-abroad experiences. From there, team leaders reached out to farmers, Extension agents, agriculture teachers, and industry representatives to develop a schedule that highlighted all four equally. Visits were encouraged to have a hands-on component if possible to allow students an opportunity to experience equipment and technology while “seeing” themselves in this career. The team leaders were split into two different groups and two in-state study experiences occurred. One group headed west and another group headed east. During the study tour, students engaged in conversations with agricultural leaders to learn more about why they chose that particular career path while also increasing their agricultural awareness. Following the trip, each participant selected one visit from the trip and developed lesson plans that could be used by an Extension agent or agriculture teacher. The lesson plan was aligned with the North Carolina course of study and promoted student learning and higher-order thinking skills. The lesson plans were distributed to teachers and agents in hopes of providing real-world context and examples that highlight the most up-to-date practices, emphasize agricultural career opportunities, and increase ag awareness.

Results to Date/Implications

During the fall break in-state study experience, twenty students participated and were led by four faculty members. All students have an interest in pursuing future careers related to agriculture and were majoring or minoring in Agricultural Education and/or Agricultural Extension, or were considering seeking a career as an agriculture teacher or Extension agent. Visits included both small and large family farming operations, processing facilities, farm markets, secondary agricultural education programs, Extension programs, research facilities, commodity organizations, historical locations, and state parks. All students indicated that the experience opened their eyes to new careers and expanded their knowledge and awareness of agriculture. Student A stated, "It was my first time in a cotton picker. I was amazed at the technology and the process involved from the field to our clothes." Another individual indicated being surprised at the challenges that farmers experience, yet their dedication and devotion to the profession are unwavering. The four faculty saw another benefit to this experience that was not part of the original objectives. Student participants grew together as a cohort and the discussions that took place after each visit in the van were reflective and showed a deeper understanding of agriculture. In addition, several of the students had never traveled to the parts of the state that were visited. One student never had imagined wanting to student teach anywhere farther than an hour away from home. She now wishes to student teach in the mountains and find a teaching job there due to this experience. This will be approximately four hours from her home.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

This study experience was incredibly beneficial for all who participated. The team leaders hope to make this experience a course offering similar to a study abroad experience. Without the grant funding, a few students indicated that they would not have attended due to financial constraints so it is imperative to secure funding that can assist with the costs. While this grant was a one-time funding source, several of the commodity organizations would be willing to sponsor a meal or component of the trip in the future. In addition, an hour per stop was budgeted, however, the majority of the stops took longer than an hour, especially when students had additional questions. Further, it greatly helped that most of the tour stops and presenters who spoke to the students were viewed as leaders in North Carolina agriculture. Their stories and explanations highlighted the "joys and discomforts" and encouraged students to think about their impacts.

Costs/Resources Needed

The grant provided \$24,000 to lead two study tours. The major costs associated with the trip were hotels, meals, and transportation. The trip utilized university vans, but there was still a cost associated with using those for trips. Students were encouraged to room together at hotels, but due to COVID concerns, some students opted for single rooms which placed that budgeted item slightly higher than expected. The majority of the meals were supported by the grant with the students paying for only three total meals. Hotels with breakfast included were also a determining factor to cut down on costs.

References

Bruening, T. H., Lopez, J., McCormick, D. F., & Dominguez, D. R. (2002). Active learning: The impact on students participating in an extended field trip to Puerto Rico. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 43(4), 67-75.

Luckey, A. (2012). *Assessing youth perceptions and knowledge of agriculture: The impact of participating in an AgVenture program* (Doctoral dissertation, Texas A & M University).