

Reimagining the Auburn University Greenhand Experience:
Hitting the Knowledge Mark

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Introduction/Need for Innovation or Idea

The Auburn University Greenhand Experience is a day-long event held on the Auburn University campus that hosts 7th to 10th grade School-Based Agricultural Education (SBAE) students from across the state of Alabama to assist in the preparation of students completing their Greenhand Degree (Mozo, 2021). This event continues a longstanding tradition of hosting leadership camps for FFA students (Connors et al., 2010). The 2023 event hosted 67 students who participated in a schedule of events which included opening and closing ceremonies, Auburn University specific activities, and four breakout sessions focusing on topics related to the FFA Greenhand degree as described by Mozo (2021). Alabama FFA state officers, Auburn University College of Agriculture ambassadors, and Auburn University Agricultural Education students served as breakout group facilitators. The sessions covered topics relating to FFA 101, Careers in Agriculture, Leadership, and Literacy/Perceptions of Agriculture.

In the reimagining process of this Greenhand Experience, the leaders of the event decided to work with participating Alabama SBAE instructors and session facilitators to provide the best experience for attending students. During this first phase, the event was opened up to allow for more Auburn University participation in the scheduling of events and breakout sessions. Alongside the increased cooperation, a focus was placed on teacher feedback with the intent of determining specific objectives and topics that should be covered in future Greenhand Experiences.

How it works/Methodology/Program Phases/Steps

During this year's event, participating teachers were asked a series of questions that included ranking current and previous topics covered at the Auburn University Greenhand Experience in terms of their importance and identifying specific skills or information that they believe their students should be learning at the event. Students were then asked, at the end of the event, to identify their favorite and least favorite sessions, provide reasons for why, and provide one lesson learned from the event.

Expected learned skills and information results from the evaluations, provided by the teachers, were thematically analyzed and used as a benchmark to verify if the themes and what the student's actually learned were aligned. The students' favorite and least favorite sessions were then compared to the teachers' ranking of sessions to help determine which breakout sessions should be provided in the future. The remaining student information that was collected was thematically analyzed to determine reasons students were more or less favorable to a session; this information will be provided to future breakout session facilitators in an attempt to provide better foundations for engaging and informative experiences.

Results to Date/Implications

Sixty students and five instructors completed the evaluation form and serve as the population for our first phase. The student population was comprised of students ranging from 7th to 10th grade with the most common being 9th ($n = 22, 37.93\%$), and of the participants who were currently in high school, 21 (55.26%) had some form of SBAE in middle school.

When asked to rank the current and previous years' breakout sessions provided at the Auburn University Greenhand Experience, the SBAE instructors most commonly placed "Leadership" ($M = 1.80, SD = 0.75$) and "Public Speaking" ($M = 2.40, SD = 1.50$) at the top and

consistently placed the remaining sessions between 4th and 5th ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.47$), with “SAE” being the lowest ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 1.02$). This year’s event did not hold a “Public Speaking” session. However, the “Leadership” session was the students’ second most indicated favorite session ($n = 14$, 23.33%), with the students’ favorite session being “FFA 101” ($n = 40$, 66.67%) and least favorite “Literacy and Perceptions of Agriculture” ($n = 25$, 42.37%).

Students were also asked to provide an explanation for their indicated favorite and least favorite sessions. Answers were coded to similar identified themes and reviewed to identify key aspects that made a session better or worse in participants’ eyes (Strauss & Corbin 1990). For the least favorite responses, items were coded based on their positive counterpart. For example, a negative response of “boring” would best associate with a positive response of “engaging.” The most common positive themes identified were Enjoyment ($n = 28$, 28.28%), Insight ($n = 17$, 17.17%), and Interaction ($n = 14$, 14.14%), which echoed most of the negative themes identified: Engagement ($n = 17$, 23.61%), Insight ($n = 13$, 18.06%), and Enjoyment ($n = 9$, 12.50%).

When asked about what they expected their students to learn at the event, teachers gravitated toward Leadership (Communication Skills), Agriculture (Careers and Issues), and FFA (History and Relevance). When looking at the emerging themes provided by students, all areas were covered and indicated as the item learned by at least one student. Agricultural topics were indicated the most ($n = 23$, 38.33%), with sub-topics being identified as Animal Sciences, Careers, and Crop Sciences. Leadership ($n = 14$, 23.33%) and FFA ($n = 11$, 18.33%) were indicated as topic areas learned with subcategories ranging from Communication Skills to Inter- and Intrapersonal skills for Leadership and the History and Background to information regarding State Officers for FFA.

Future Plans/Advice to Others & Costs/Resources Needed

Taking the lessons learned from the 2023 Auburn University Greenhand Experience, future iterations will focus on skill-based breakout sessions that cover topics specific to Communication Skills in Leadership, Opportunities/Careers in Agriculture, and the History and Student Interaction with FFA. Breakout facilitators will be informed of this new initiative and apprised of the specific topics to be addressed when approached for the upcoming event. Looking at what made up the reason for sessions to be more memorable, future facilitators will also be provided with a “Best Practice” document that will share an overview of the most commonly indicated reasons for successful sessions.

Upon beginning this reimagining process, it was this team’s goal to meet the needs of our SBAE instructors and their students. While we would consider our Greenhand Experience a success, we recognize areas that can be improved upon. Those areas are directly related to the expectation gap on the learning experience that our event is to provide. To best address this or future misalignments on these expectations, we recommend discussing with the SBAE instructors their expectations, assessing the information that is being gained by the participants of the event, and sharing any gaps with current and future facilitators to meet those needs.

While hosting a Greenhand Experience can be costly, working through this process to address the needs of your participants is not. Recourses needed would include materials necessary for an evaluation instrument for participating instructors (Qualtrics) and students (pencil and paper), software to evaluate your data (SPSS/Excel), and the means to address gaps identified (time and effort). While the costs associated with these resources vary, the upside of a more enjoyable and successful event often outweighs the costs.

References

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