

Fostering Connected Communities through Agricultural Celebrations

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Introduction

Facilitating outreach and connection between the campus and its student community is crucial. In-person interactions are an important component of relationship-building and decades of research has demonstrated that students who have a strong sense of belonging at their institutions are more likely to persist and graduate (Beauchamp et al., 2020). Connecting college students' connection to campus life creates a healthy and prosperous college experience (Jorgenson et al., 2018). Connectedness is an overarching construct encompassing students' ease of belongingness, integration, and satisfaction with their relationship with their institution. It can affect student commitment to the institution (Jorgenson et al., 2018).

The practice of advocacy within an agricultural college is to extend outreach within a university and to its community. The purpose of advocating includes providing information regarding various topics so audiences can make informed decisions (Farm, 2022). Less than two percent of the population is involved in production agriculture, with a continuously dwindling percentage of consumers exposed to understanding where their food comes from (Farm, 2022). This makes productive conversations centered around agriculture an increasingly vital topic to endure. Identifying an event where the two components of connecting students and intertwining agricultural advocacy assists in ensuring the Texas Tech University Davis College of Agriculture has fulfilled its mission.

To ignite the value of connectedness and belonging of its students to Texas Tech and agriculture, the Davis College of Agriculture found the importance by celebrating National Milk Day. National Milk Day is an agricultural holiday celebrated annually on Jan. 11. It is a day to commemorate the first U.S. milk delivery to homes in sterilized glass bottles in 1878, marking a turning point in the accessibility of milk (Gula, 2022). Texas ranks fifth nationally in dairy production and in its number of dairy cows with 351 dairies that produced more than 14.8 billion pounds of milk in 2020 (Bryan, et al., 2021). To honor the history and student connection to agriculture and campus, Davis College planned an efficient and interactive way to advocate for the industry. Celebrating national agricultural-based holidays helps reach larger audiences accessible through on-campus events and ensuring students feel appreciated.

How it Works

After generating the idea of an interactive event to bring awareness of agriculture to the student body of Texas Tech, plans began to celebrate National Milk Day as a beginning of the semester celebration to welcome students back to campus. The event lasted approximately two hours and took place in the dairy barn, a building that shares historical facts and stories of dairy production on Texas Tech's campus. The event offered donuts and milk to participants, donated by a local dairy company. Stations were created for participants to learn about dairy and milk

production throughout the event, which included a virtual farm experience through Oculus headsets provided by a Texas producer group. Student representatives from [CLUB NAMES] assisted in the program, as leaders well-positioned to connect with other students, and they often understand and relate to student experiences (Beauchamp et al., 2020).

Results to Date

To address the importance of milk production and its history to the Davis College of Agriculture, the communications team developed an interactive event to connect students to the industry. At least 150 students passed through the event, and all donuts and milk were consumed. Although we were able to quantify the results with a head count, other results that were not quantifiable were students meeting one other, students reconnecting after the winter break, students and faculty getting acquainted, and all participants experiencing the VR headsets to learn more about the dairy industry.

Future Plans

The Davis College of Agriculture plans to celebrate National Ag Day and other agricultural holidays with the goals of increasing public awareness of agriculture's vital role in society and building student connections (Agriculture, 2023). Plans for future events include increased student organization involvement with booths and interactive activities designed to highlight the different industry sectors with professional industry organization representatives to host presentations for students.

Hosting on-campus events allows the students and community in the Davis College of Agriculture to participate in agricultural advocacy, reaching a broader audience where producers and consumers meet, while fostering a community of belonging and connection.

Costs

Costs were minimal as almost everything was donated: the building, milk, donuts, and Oculus headsets. In total, the college saved approximately \$700 through these donations. The Dean's office paid for Holstien-print themed decorations: balloons, plates, napkins, table coverings, and balloons, totaling \$100.

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