

Chapter Leadership Conference: Engaging High School Seniors On-Campus

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Introduction/Need for Innovation or Idea

This year, 2024, became the first year Auburn University offered the Chapter Leadership Conference (CLC). This track expanded an event Auburn University already offered, Greenhand Leadership Conference. The purpose of CLC was to offer seniors in high school agriculture programs across the state an opportunity to tour the university's agricultural facilities and offer insight into potential agricultural career opportunities. The one-day program toured seniors around Ag Hill and the Forestry and Wildlife Building. After the tours, students went to an academic browse to speak with 14 different academic advisors to discuss various careers.

The core purpose of having the CLC at Auburn University was to expose students to potential careers and to motivate them to continue their academic pursuits in an agricultural-related field at Auburn University. Keeping students engaged in school encouraging students beyond the classroom is not an easy task for any teacher (Anderson et al., 2018). Students need encouragement to get engaged and increase motivation (Williams & Williams, 2011). Studies have shown that keeping learners engaged in activities that mimic real world situations and the work of professionals in the field are crucial to their success (Rule, 2006).

How it Works/Methodology/Program Phases/Steps

CLC began by inviting all high school agriculture programs in the state to participate. The invitation was sent to teachers by the state FFA leaders via email listserv. Once the email was sent out, agriscience teachers could register through a Qualtrics form which was designed by the graduate assistant in charge of the event.

To keep students engaged during the event, they were provided with multiple activities throughout the day. Following registration at the Student Activity Center, students took photos with the university's mascot, then attended the opening ceremony presented by Alabama state FFA officers. Afterwards, students and advisors took campus transit buses to Ag Hill then the Forestry and Wildlife building. Upon arrival at Ag Hill, students were toured around by agriculture ambassadors who detailed what the university has to offer, potential careers in agriculture for the students, and a few buildings included in the College of Agriculture. Once the Ag Hill tour finished, students moved to the Forestry and Wildlife building, where they toured these facilities led by staff personnel. Next, the students participated in an academic browse which was composed of 14 academic advisors for many agriculturally related degree programs. The advisors spoke one-on-one with individual students to discuss future careers and opportunities if they attended Auburn University. Following the academic browse, students were transported back to the Student Activity Center to have closing ceremonies and finish with lunch provided.

Results to Date/Implications

Following the Greenhand and Chapter Leadership Conference, students were given a questionnaire to complete regarding their experience at the conference. The questionnaire highlighted three themes associated with the experience. The data indicated 77% of students enjoyed visiting campus and touring the agricultural facilities. Majority of participants (75%)

found the tours and the academic browse to be educational and profitable for them. Students were asked about the importance of having networking opportunities and if these opportunities are important to them. The data showed 67% of students believed in the importance of networking. This positive feedback indicates that students felt as though their time on-campus was worth the investment, and that universities and students alike can benefit from networking with one another to pursue future university students seeking agricultural fields. No Chapter track was held in previous years, and yet 57 students participated on-campus in this first year.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

A crucial role in the success of CLC was having dedicated transit bus drivers to transport students across campus. The original plan was to have students walk a two-mile circle around campus, but advice was given that it might be asking students to walk too far across various grades of slope. The decision was made to rent university transit buses for the day. The weather on the day of the event brought significant thunderstorms, so using the university's transportation provided smooth transitions between destinations and kept the students dry from the intense rain.

While the academic browse did offer insight into the university, the duration of an hour was too long. After a half hour student engagement began to wane, and students began to huddle up in the hallway. To help keep the students' attention, a student panel might be the route to go in the future. The panel would be made up of three current students who would be asked questions by the students about their experiences and insight. If the participants are not asking questions, pre-prepared questions could be asked by a moderator.

The last piece of advice is to split up time touring and avoid having it back-to-back. This caused a slight burnout with the students where they seemed disengaged in the second tour. During the second tour, students were not actively engaging with the conversation and material. To help mitigate the issue, a new schedule will be in place to split up the tours and have one offered at the beginning of the day and the other at the closing of the day.

Cost/Resources Needed

The resources needed for the CLC are a facility to welcome the students to the conference, facilities to showcase via tours, and a location within these facilities for an academic browse. The financial cost associated with the conference included renting campus transit buses, campus facilities fees, an event tee shirt, and lunch. Additional resources needed are fourteen advisors who helped with the academic browse, student volunteers to travel with each CLC group, and three student ambassadors who led the tours. Also, time to rent spaces, organize and plan event, and set up for academic browse.

References

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