

**Engaging Communities: A Digital Outreach Approach to Educate, Engage, and Empower
Stewards and Students in a Farm Safety Post-Secondary Education Project**

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Introduction

The average American sources 60% of their educational information from social media outlets. (PEW, 2024). This, coupled with the staggering increase in farm safety accidents in recent years (BLS, 2023), has resulted in a multi-collegial project to deploy a preventative measure into their promotion of agricultural safety. The Safe Farm Steward Project, or SFS, created by [universities] and funded by the Southeast Center for Agricultural Health and Injury Prevention, empowers producers to enhance farm safety to reduce agricultural safety hazards (SFS, 2024). Universities, extension agents, and high schools aid local farmers by nominating them for their contribution toward maintaining safe farm practices. The farm evaluation includes an assessment of farm equipment safety, designed by field experts. If the participating farm receives a score of 70% or above, certification of Safe Farm Stewardship is presented. The project aims to recognize 2,000 Southeast farmers as Safe Farm Stewards over the next three years. After reviewing project success following the first two years, it was determined that a sense of community and continual educational opportunities were needed. In response, two social media platforms were created to educate, engage, and empower the public, participants, and students regarding SFS. This research aligns with AAAE's research values "Promoting Personal Responsibility and Safety in AFNR Systems" (AAAE, 2023).

How it works

Information sharing and community building across social media platforms is hardly a new concept (Thorp, 2023). Previous research has established Facebook to be extremely effective in sharing news information with stakeholders and the general public (Kalsnes & Larsson, 2017; PEW, 2024). With this in mind, researchers at [university] deployed a Facebook intended for certified stewards to collaborate, receive new information from [university], and share personal experiences/ achievements. Likewise, Instagram is currently the most utilized social media platform for youth (Anter & Kumpel, 2023); thus, an Instagram account was created to serve as an educational tool for students participating in the program. This includes back-to-school videos, instructional infographics, and links to supplemental information. To date, the scholars post once per week on each page.

Results to Date/ Implications

Following pilot posts in July 2024, the Instagram and Facebook pages have created opportunities for students and stewards alike to be involved in a virtual community for farm safety. To date, the SFS Facebook and Instagram pages host 20, and 9 followers respectively.

Page interactions for both sites have extended beyond the current followers and led to interesting results.

Stewards are more likely to message privately on Facebook than comment on posts, as stewards send photos of their farms and equipment in hopes of being posted. Unpredicted results of the Facebook page include a potential participating school, inspired to participate in the program after witnessing collaborative efforts and posts from the project's annual seminar. Likewise, it has been discovered that students did not message privately, but instead opt to rewatch any media- suggested by the "Back to School" video being watched more times than followers had. This suggests that social media, while slow growing, will be successful in its intended purpose of developing an information-based online community (Carr & Hayes, 2015).

Future plans

The SFS Instagram and Facebook pages are designed to expand outreach and engage a larger online community regarding farm safety. The project aims to grow its following significantly through targeted posts, visuals, and informative content. Showcasing the success of current stewards and sharing safety tips will be utilized to build a supportive community for stewards, showcasing success stories and serving as a forum for southeastern farmer's collaboration. This approach resonates with current stewards and a broader audience, enhancing visibility to reach local producers, agriculture students, and community members who prioritize safe farm practices. In addition to expanding followers, SFS's primary focus regarding social media includes the recruitment of future stewards. Interactive content and community collaboration will spotlight the many benefits of becoming a Safe Farm Steward and encourage an increase in program participants for farmers and students alike. As a Safe Farm Advocate is created through the submission of five farms, each of these advocates is highlighted throughout the Instagram and Facebook pages, notifying the success of the student and farmer.

Costs/resources needed

The creation and facilitation of each social media account utilizes minimal resources; however, each account is managed by a graduate research assistant who maintains the active accounts daily. The graduate student receives a salary and tuition. Furthermore, each participating post-secondary institution receives an annual stipend for participation in the project and for encouraging their students to follow each page, utilize the page's resources, and supply media for the research team so they can highlight the success of each admitted farmer.

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