

Creating Career-Aware and Civic-Ready Students Through Foundational SAEs

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### Introduction

As 7-12 agricultural education instructors, we understand the value and importance of guiding students to career awareness and civic readiness as they make their way through our programs. Yet, despite the intensive efforts of many nationwide, a crisis exists in reaching these goals for many students (Zalaznick, 2022; Zatynski, 2024). A staggering 41% of recent high school graduates felt unprepared to choose a career or college major (Zalaznick, 2022). Additionally, another 42% lacked confidence or were only slightly confident in their chosen path (Zalaznick, 2022). Further, the Youth Civic Empowerment Report highlights students are eager to be active, engaged, and civic-ready students in their communities (Sinclair, 2024). However, fewer than half of students felt they received the necessary skills through their education to do so (Sinclair, 2024).

Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAEs) are key to developing career-aware and civic-ready students. However, implementing SAE for All and Foundational SAEs is essential in reaching SAE's fullest potential (The Council, 2017). The implementation of "Developing Career-Aware and Civic-Ready Students" created curricular resources focused on SAE for All and its implementation. This project helped ensure *all* students had direct instruction in the areas of "Support for career self-awareness, exploration, planning, and management" and "Civic Readiness" (Nebraska Department of Education, 2022). Ultimately, this project boosts students' knowledge and confidence to choose post-graduation paths and be active and prepared community members.

### Methodology

To begin, I evaluated curriculum maps, the school calendar, and other related schedules to identify space for project implementation. From there, I met with other educators in the school system. Developing career-aware and civic-ready students is undoubtedly a cross-curricular effort, so this step allowed me to concentrate on developing a curriculum supplement unique from what students received in other classes, resulting in the greatest student benefit. I also identified quality indicators using the Nebraska Comprehensive Needs Assessment (2022): 1) Civic readiness, and 2) Support for career self-awareness, exploration, planning, and management.

Armed with knowledge from my conversations and the needs assessment, I designed six lessons for the introductory Agriscience course. High school graduates are most at risk for career-choice confidence and civic-readiness skills (Sinclair, 2024; Zalaznick, 2022). These lessons served high school freshmen, enrolled in Agriscience (and participating in the curriculum), who are currently on track to graduate.

This lesson package included a general SAE for All Overview and five lessons, each focusing on a different area of Foundational SAEs. Concurrently, I developed at least one project for each advancement level outlined in the SAE for All Teacher's Implementation Guide (The Council, 2017). For example, in the Career Exploration and Planning project, students at the Awareness level could complete "ABC Skills," where they identify career-oriented skills and

then match those skills to a career, whereas students at the Advanced level could research, compare, and contrast postsecondary options aligned with their current career plans in “Future Frenzy.” Throughout the same two months, I taught these lessons to ninth-grade students. Finally, I met with my cooperating teacher following each lesson and evaluated its effectiveness. Together, we identified which lesson components were well received by students and reviewed end-of-lesson summary components to evaluate student learning.

### **Findings/Results**

Through the implementation of these lessons, students were able to define skills and develop their knowledge base in areas directly related to career awareness and civic readiness. Before teaching, I provided each student with a pre-assessment to understand their entrance levels of knowledge and comfort related to my identified quality standards. Following the completion of the curriculum, students took the same assessment in a post-assessment and comment format.

Agricultural educators are aware that post-graduation plans look different from one individual to the next. To evaluate if students gained ease of mind in identifying these plans, I asked students to rate their agreement with, “I feel prepared for life after high school.” In the post-assessment 63.7% of students answered “Agree” or “Strongly agree” compared to 36.4% in the pre-assessment. In addition, civic readiness entails a wide array of characteristics. To address this aspect of the project, students rated, “I know how to be a productive member of my community after high school.” 27.3% of students responded “Strongly agree” in the post-assessment compared to 0% in the pre-assessment.

### **Future Plans/ Advice**

As a whole, this project suggests SAE for All and Foundational SAEs support developing career awareness and civic readiness in secondary education students. These lessons and activities highlighted the importance and value of implementing this program in agriculture education programs nationwide, as I will in my future program. When fully utilized, this set of resources addresses the crisis of students being unsure of their steps following graduation (Zalaznick, 2022). Further, this curriculum prepares students to be active and engaged members of communities, leading to the longevity and prosperity of communities of all shapes and sizes. For best implementation success, this curricular supplement is an ideal step in ensuring student preparedness post-program participation.

### **Cost/ Resources Needed**

Implementing these lessons on the local scale was a relatively low-cost, high-reward effort. Most imperative to the success of this curriculum are technology-related needs. At a minimum, the educator and students need access to the internet, a computer, and a projection method. Alternatively, educators' access to a printer and a creative mindset would result in the same positive outcomes. Typical classroom resources such as paper, colored pencils, and scissors are needed. Finally, this curriculum required the human resources of time and knowledge to develop and implement lessons.

## References

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