

Increasing Opportunities for FFA Members with Disabilities: The Agricultural Skills Showcase

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Introduction

School-based agricultural education (SBAE) offers a unique platform for teaching knowledge and skills to students. Through hands-on learning experiences taught within the three-component model, students learn not only technical agriculture skills but critical life skills such as responsibility, communication, and teamwork, all of which are essential for success in daily life. Participating in activities of the FFA organization and completing a Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) project enables students to connect classroom instruction with real-world applications to learn many of these essential skills (Phipps et al., 2008). While the benefits of FFA and SAE are numerous, not all agricultural education students equally participate in these activities (Martin & Kitchel, 2014). Participation in FFA competitive events, particularly Proficiency Interviews and Career Development Events (CDEs), is often limited above the local level, and a population often affected by this are students with disabilities (Johnson et al., 2012).

During the 2022-2023 academic year, 7.5 million students (15% of all students) received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (NCES, 2024). Of all students receiving those services, it is estimated that approximately 180,000 are enrolled in SBAE programs (Teixeira & Edwards, 2020). With clear benefits of FFA and SAE participation and the significant increase of IDEA students taking Career and Technical Education classes over the past fifteen years (NSBA, n.d.), it is essential that the agricultural education community provide additional opportunities and equal access for students with disabilities to compete and receive recognition in similar-type events. Perhaps offering a competitive event open to every FFA member, regardless of abilities, would be a step toward increasing access and equity for all agricultural education students.

How it Works

The Agricultural Skills Showcase was originally developed in 2022 as an event for all 7-12 grade Illinois FFA members with intellectual disabilities, IEPs, or 504s to highlight the individual skills they have attained in their agricultural education program. However, the showcase is now open to all agricultural education students and FFA members in Illinois who wish to participate. This annual event is conducted virtually, eliminating travel barriers and the need to limit participation. Students can choose to compete in areas such as agricultural mechanics, animal science, plant sciences, natural resources, foods/cooking, public speaking, FFA Creed, Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE), and college and career readiness (Foundational SAE areas).

Students select a method to provide evidence of successfully engaging in their agricultural education skills based on their ability. This could be a written document, video, drawing, poster, or other item they develop. A panel of judges then evaluates the submission based on four categories within the rubric: (1) skill identification, (2) documentation, (3) communicating the growth of skill, and (4) presentation method. Following the initial judging, if the student is willing and comfortable sharing their artifact with a committee, a 5–8-minute

virtual interview is conducted via Zoom. This assists students in meeting IEP goals relating to communications, conversations, and expressive language. The interview is then scored on three categories, which include (1) explanation of the project/skill, (2) questions, and (3) future plans. All IEP modifications and accommodations are honored throughout the event. Students are awarded Gold, Silver, and Bronze ratings based on their project quality and receive awards for competing.

Results to Date

Since its inception, sixty-nine ($n = 69$) agricultural education students have participated in the Agricultural Skills Showcase. Both students and FFA advisors have expressed a deep appreciation for adding this event to our state's programming. One agriculture teacher stated, As an advisor who has encouraged students to participate in the Ag Skills Showcase, I have seen firsthand the benefits this event provides students. The Ag Skills Showcase is a unique event for Illinois FFA members that welcomes students to participate in FFA in a way they may never have before by highlighting their skills at their own educational level.

Another agriculture teacher said,

I find so much value in the Ag Skills Showcase as it opens doors for all students, celebrating their unique talents and their potential in agriculture. I have found that it truly empowers students, especially those with intellectual disabilities, IEPs, or 504 Plans, to shine in a supportive environment. I believe that the Ag Skills Showcase highlights the best aspects of premier leadership and personal growth as we work to provide opportunities for all students, ensuring every student has the chance to succeed!

Future Plans & Advice to Others

Our state plans to continue hosting this event to ensure all students have the opportunity to experience premier leadership, personal growth, and career success, regardless of their ability level. We have seen a clear need for this type of event, and our goal is to continue providing this opportunity for our students. We know many more students are eligible to participate and strive to communicate this opportunity to all of our agriculture teachers to promote for future years. One piece of advice we would provide to others wishing to implement a similar event would be to find the appropriate time of year to conduct their showcase. To increase participation, we have moved our event artifact submission and judging earlier in the spring semester before FFA chapters get busy with other FFA contests and application deadlines.

Cost & Resources Needed

There is a small entry fee for students to participate to cover the cost of awards and postage. FFA chapters with students only choosing to submit an artifact are charged \$3.00 per student (which includes an award certificate), while those submitting artifacts and having students interview are charged \$6.00 per student (which includes an award certificate, sticker, and a prize). If a student wishes to submit more than one entry, they can do so for an additional \$1.00/entry. The other resources needed would be an online platform to conduct interviews and judges willing to give their time to interview the students.

References

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