

Chapter Leadership Conference for High School Seniors

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Introduction/Need for Innovation or Idea

A leadership conference has been hosted at Auburn University since 2017 for first-year FFA members in Alabama (McLeod et al., 2022). In fall 2024, a second track was added to the event for senior FFA members known as Chapter Leadership Conference (CLC). The purpose of CLC was to offer seniors in high school agriculture programs across Alabama an opportunity to tour the university's agricultural facilities and offer insight into potential agricultural career opportunities. The one-day program engaged seniors in tours of Ag Hill and the Forestry and Wildlife Building and in an academic browse to meet with academic advisors for the various agriculture, forestry, and natural resources (AFNR) degree programs on campus.

The core purpose of CLC was to expose students to potential careers and to motivate them to continue their academic pursuits in an AFNR field at Auburn University. Keeping students engaged in school by 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) in agriculture as well as forestry (Ray et al., 2022). 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 (Clemons & Lindner, 2019; McKibben & Murphy, 2021; McKibben et al., 2022; McKibben et al., 2023; McKibben et al., 2024; Rule, 2006).

How it Works/Methodology/Program Phases/Steps

The Chapter Leadership Conference began by inviting all high school agriculture programs in the state to participate. This invitation was sent to teachers in summer 2024 sent to teachers in summer 2024 by the state FFA leaders via email listserv. Once the email was sent out, agriscience teachers could register through a Qualtrics form the graduate assistant in charge of the event designed which was designed by the graduate assistant in charge of the event. In early fall 2024, we secured locations for CLC on campus and confirmed potential speakers.

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 Aubie the Tiger, 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 attended a tour led by College of Agriculture (COA) Ambassadors who detailed what the university has to offer, potential careers in agriculture for the students, and a few COA buildings. Once the Ag Hill tour finished, students moved to the Forestry, Natural Resources, and Wildlife building, where they toured these facilities led by staff. Next, the students participated in an academic browse which was comprised of 14 academic advisors for the AFNR degree programs on campus. 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 for lunch and closing ceremonies.

Results to Date/Implications

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.

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 it was recommended 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. We intend to continue offering transit buses for this event in the future and recommend other universities to do the same if the campus is not easily walkable.

While the academic browse did offer insight into the university, the duration of an hour was too long. After about 30 minutes, student engagement began to wane. To help keep the students' attention, we plan to host a panel of current students in future. We believe a panel of three current students could be provided potential questions prior to the event and asked questions by the students about their experiences and insight. We recommend utilizing past state FFA officers who are current students as panelists, which could encourage CLC participants to engage more in the panel.

The last piece of advice we offer is to not have the programmatic tours back-to-back. Despite traveling between two different areas of campus, our back-to-back tours led to a slight disengagement among students during the second tour. We saw that students were not actively engaging with the conversation and material in the second tour. To help mitigate the issue, we plan to schedule the tours at the beginning and end of the event and host an academic browse and current student panel between the tours.

Cost/Resources Needed

The main expenses for the event were lunch, the venue, conference tee shirts, and transportation via university transit buses. The venue's fixed cost was \$1,675.00 for one day and included a grand ballroom and three breakout rooms. The shirts were \$12.57 per student and a boxed lunch from Chick-fil-a was \$10.57 per student. We needed two university transit buses to move students around campus over three hours, costing \$850.00. To help cover the costs of the event, business sponsors were secured, and students were charged \$25.00 each to attend. To put on an event like CLS, resources needed include a facility to welcome the students to the conference, facilities to showcase via tours, and locations within these facilities for an academic browse and current student panel. Additional resources needed are academic advisors to help with the academic browse, student volunteers to travel with each CLC group, and student ambassadors to lead the tours. Time to rent spaces, organize and plan events, and set up for the event is required.

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