

Shining a Light on Abilities: Empowering Youth Through the Sunshine Class Livestock Show

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Introduction

One of the largest scaled minorities in the world is individuals with disabilities which is equivalent to fifteen percent of our overall population (World Health Organization, 2023; Disability Funders Network, n.d.). Within the United States, roughly 634,000 individuals with disabilities contribute to the agricultural industry (Gula, 2023). A universal absence of inclusion has surrounded young individuals with disabilities in activities which foster educational, social and economic growth (Groce, 2024). Thus, there is a call to action to provide programs that allow for youth with disabilities to have a place within the agriculture industry which cultivate skills and opportunities that they may be denied otherwise.

According to Stumpf-Downing et al. (2004), the definition of inclusion means all individuals have the chance to learn a multitude of skills in an environment that is physically and emotionally safe while concurrently having the chance to make choices out of free will. Inclusion is not placing an individual with disabilities into a program, rather it is the physical and social integration while also allowing the individual to partake in the activity at their own level of comfort (Stumpf-Downing et al., 2004). The Sunshine Class at the Kentucky State Fair embodies the definition of inclusion and acceptance. This class was developed with the incitive to provide the opportunity for individuals with disabilities the opportunity to partake in the livestock show experience. Through this hands-on opportunity, youth are provided with a safe environment to exhibit sheep as well as become involved in the agriculture sector (Kentucky Department of Agriculture, 2025).

How it works

The Sunshine class embodies the definition of inclusion and acceptance which readily aligns with the AAAE research values of ensuring diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (AAAE, 2023). With the prerogative of nurturing positive youth development through AFNR systems (AAAE, 2023). Preliminary to the event, social media posts are published on multiple platforms to gain attention from individuals across the state. Cultivating partnerships with organizations such as Special Olympics provides additional advertising outlets to reach the targeted population. Distinctive media sessions for the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner of Agriculture are scheduled on behalf of the Sunshine class to promote participation. Also, verbal advertisement is utilized at youth livestock expositions through announcements and personal appearances. In advance, the volunteers from Kentucky Department of Agriculture, Extension agents, fairground staff, and private individuals from outside sources dedicate their time and effort leading up to and during the event.

The guidelines to operate the event are extremely minimum. Individuals of all ages are able to participate in the class. On the day of the event individuals are escorted to the ring where their guardians will provide common information to be announced over the speakers. Each participant is strategically placed with a sheep and youth mentor. Youth mentors are fellow FFA and 4-H individuals who exhibit lambs at the Kentucky State Fair, specifically middle to high school aged students. The mentorship experience fosters an impact beyond the participants with disabilities, as it has a lasting impression left on the youth volunteering as mentors. A study by Perales (2019), details the impact of nondisabled peers participating in mentoring programs which increased their awareness and advocacy for disabilities. To recruit livestock and mentors to be utilized in the class, individuals from the Kentucky Department of Agriculture will walk the

barns requesting volunteers. Youth exhibitors can willingly donate their livestock and their time to be utilized throughout the class. The participant and mentor exhibit the sheep in the show ring and interact with the judge. Mentors are designed to assist according to the showman's level of independence or comfort. Guardians are allowed in the show ring to assist the participants. Within the ring, adult volunteers, such as Extension agents, are utilized to direct exhibitors and properly file them into a line so the judge can properly utilize the allotted time to interact with each showman. After the exhibitor has finished showing the lamb, they are guided to a backdrop where the participants are accompanied by Miss Kentucky and presented with a championship banner donated by partners such as the Kentucky Fair Board. From the commencement of the class to the concluding picture, the event lasted 60 minutes.

Results to date/ Implications

Since the first Sunshine class, the event has fostered opportunities to collaborate with industry businesses and the community to create an inclusive environment in hopes to bring awareness to disabilities in agriculture. At this moment, the event has impacted around 63 students with disabilities, 65 youth mentors, and additional volunteers ranging from the Kentucky Department of Agriculture to Special Olympics Kentucky. As the class approaches the third year, there has been an influx of participants and volunteers to compose the event. Partnerships with the fair board and Special Olympics Kentucky have provided a range of resources from volunteers to monetary funds.

Future Plans

The Sunshine class was assembled to represent and serve individuals with disabilities in Kentucky. To ensure this program benefits each participant, the class aspires to form new partnerships throughout the community. Organizations such as the Autistic Self Advocacy Network of Central Kentucky or the Down Syndrome Association of Central Kentucky can provide beneficial support as they promote the program in hopes of more individuals participating in the class. When collaborating with these partners, the event will form a short training course for mentors to participate in which will educate them on how to properly work with individuals that have a disability.

To further progress the program, a study will be conducted around the Sunshine class and the influence it has on the individuals surrounding the event. A graduate student from the University of Kentucky will further evaluate the impact the Sunshine class has on the mentors, parents, students, volunteers, and community. Through this study, researchers hope to not only assist in the future improvements of the Sunshine class but also generate a call to action to the agricultural education profession in developing more inclusive programming for students with disabilities.

Costs/ Resources Needed

For this program to be sustainable, the main resources needed are the ring, judge, lambs, and volunteers. There is no additional cost to make the ring accessible, as it is already created with accessibility in mind. Along with ensuring the materials are in working order, volunteers donate their time and effort to foster program success. Additional materials include a championship banner which is donated by the Kentucky Fair Board and presented as an award to each exhibitor. Without the donation, each banner would cost ten dollars which would allocate a total of seven hundred dollars to the awards budget.

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