

**Engaging Teacher Candidates in Developing and Evaluating a Mock Program of Activities
and National Chapter Award**

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Introduction and Need for Idea

The program of activities (POA) utilizes 15 quality standards to guide the development and direction of an FFA chapter each year in three divisions: growing leaders, building communities, and strengthening agriculture (National FFA Organization, 2025a). A POA consists of a listing of activities along with a brief description, their connection to the quality standards, and a listing of goals for each event. While most programs must submit a POA to remain in good standing at the state level (National FFA Organization, 2023), some chapters participate in the national chapter award (NCA) program as a way to recognize the efforts of their chapter and vvy for recognition at the state or national level (National FFA Organization, 2025b). While the POA and NCA application should be driven by student efforts (National FFA Organization, 2025b), an advisor should understand how they work and provide support for their students' efforts. Despite this, assisting with FFA applications and developing a program of activities are significant challenges among in-service educators (Hainline & Smalley, 2023; Torres & Dormody, 1997), and less than 10% of FFA chapters report participating in the NCA program annually (Sheehan & Moore, 2019). This idea is needed to support educators in developing skills and knowledge in these areas so they can support their students and programs. As part of a new "Leadership Strategies in Agricultural Education" course at Iowa State University, students gained hands-on experience learning what goes into developing a quality POA and NCA application.

Methodology

After learning about the 15 quality standards and reviewing several activities commonly seen within an FFA chapter, the class brainstorms a list of activities they could complete as part of a mock POA. Students then practice matching each activity with the relevant quality standards. Once all activities are matched with a quality standard, the class identifies one activity for each quality standard to use for their mock POA. Students engage in a brief, live demonstration training on how to use AET, and create events in AET to develop a POA. While a POA includes descriptions and complete documentation for all 15 events, the NCA application only requires full plans and evaluations for nine activities (three from each of the three divisions of the POA). Depending on class sizes, students can work individually or in groups, so all nine activities are accounted for in the mock NCA application. We review the rubric and evaluation criteria as a class to emphasize the importance of being familiar with the rules and evaluation parameters. Then, students complete each area of the NCA for one event, and report mock outcomes for their events to get practice with each area of the application. After finishing their event within the application, the class engages in a mock award application review day to simulate a review process they might assist with on a regional or state level as an agricultural educator. After "review day," the class engages in a reflection activity or conversation to solidify the learning and reinforce key ideas, such as the impact of a strong POA on a community, the importance in having award applications being student-led, and the value of guiding students to review rubrics.

Results and Implications

This year, we reviewed our class' complete NCA application; each student scored the application using National FFA's NCA rubric, along with splitting up approximately 45 Iowa FFA agriscience fair applications provided by the Iowa FFA association executive director, so that an

entire class period could be devoted to learning about reviewing award applications. At the start of the unit, teacher candidates (TCs) were overwhelmed by the task of guiding students to develop POA, and were unsure how to facilitate these conversations. Many did not even know the NCA program existed, and those that did know about the NCA program did not see how it connected to the POA. However, as a result of the review day experience, TCs were more prepared to assist their students in developing strong applications for the NCA.

TCs recognized by entering into application season with a plan on how to best help students read and understand rubrics, they can develop stronger materials and get recognized for their work. While the NCA they completed as a class would have scored high enough to be considered a “3-star FFA chapter” as described by National FFA, the students achieved this because they knew and understood the rubric; they recognized not understanding the rubric and going into the experience without a plan would have resulted in a lower score. Students also recognized that despite their original lack of knowledge on POA and NCA, their writing and planning abilities are higher than those of FFA members, and that their future students likely would need more guidance. One student shared, “Although I have better writing skills than a high schooler, I originally didn’t know how I’d help students even get started on a POA or NCA. Now, I at least understand how it works, and feel ready to help them be successful.” Further, students recognized several of the state agriscience applications they reviewed did not follow the rubric, and scored poorly. This activity helped TCs recognize the value of guiding efforts using rubrics, and that success in these competitive events can be possible, even if they did not have experiences in these competitive events. We hope this experience encourages them to participate once they enter the classroom, and that more chapters participate in the NCA in the future.

Future Plans and Advice

In the future, we plan to continue this activity within the course. Next year, we will also look into including an opportunity for TCs to evaluate other NCA applications from around Iowa to provide chapters with feedback before they advance to state or national judging. Several TCs also signed up to help with state NCA application judging as a result of the course, and found value in learning more about activities hosted around the state, as these gave them ideas of possible activities they could share with their future students.

We would advise using the free resources provided by the National FFA and the NCA committee to provide teacher candidates with additional resources on preparing quality NCA applications. Further, we would advise teacher preparation programs to emphasize the fact that when teachers enter the classroom, these applications must be student-led, not teacher-led (National FFA Organization, 2025b). Teachers should view their role as feedback providers, not writers. The value in having teacher candidates completing and scoring a mock application is that the students obtain ideas of activities they could have students engage in within their future FFA chapter, gain familiarity with the NCA program, and understand the value of reading a rubric. Gaining these insights provides teachers with the ability to help students, not to do the work for them.

Costs and Resources

Implementing this idea does not require resources beyond three to four class sessions, an AET account for each student (\$0 for mock accounts with National FFA), printed materials (copies of the NCA application and grading rubrics for each student) (<\$5), and student internet access.

References

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