

**Training Advocates: An Online Pilot for Advocacy and Communication Skills**

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## **Training Ag-vocates: An Online Pilot for Advocacy and Communication Skills in Nonprofits**

### **Introduction**

Nonprofits are private, self-governed organizations dependent on volunteer participation and whose income is reinvested rather than distributed as profits to investors in order to fulfill an organizational mission of serving the public good in very specific ways, such as feeding the poor or providing healthcare services (Salamon & Anheier, 1992). The agricultural sector serves the public good through food production and conservation of open spaces (USDA, n.d.), and producers work with legislators to shape policy on risk mitigation, economic subsidies, and conservation incentives among many other issues (Russell, 2018). Like all other legal entities, nonprofits must operate within their given legislative environment, but there is an opportunity to shape this environment to their favor through advocacy (Child & Grønbjerg, 2007). The core objective of advocacy is to influence policies and public opinion in meaningful ways, creating lasting, positive change that supports the nonprofit's long-term success and ultimately targets the root cause of the issue it addresses (Fyall, 2016). The level of advocacy necessarily correlates to the amount of government involvement in a given sector, and, for agriculture, there is significant involvement, thus necessitating the need for strong and expansive advocacy efforts (Child & Grønbjerg, 2007; Lencucha et al., 2020). Therefore, it is in agricultural nonprofit leaders' and members' best interest to favorably influence that environment through advocacy efforts aimed at changing government policies and policymakers' opinions to positively impact the nonprofit's ability to serve its mission (Child & Grønbjerg, 2007).

Agricultural nonprofit leaders and members can benefit from advocacy-specific training targeted at improving their ability to communicate with legislators in terms they understand, make evidence-based policy and resource requests, and effectively build coalitions between their nonprofit and supportive legislative offices (Mason & Jones, 2020). Aligned with AAAE research priority 1: Public and policymaker understanding of agriculture and natural resources (Roberts et al., 2016), our research sought to evaluate the performance of an online training in advocacy and communication skills among members of agricultural nonprofits in one U. S. state, as a means to empower grassroots organizations to become more engaged with legislators and communicate their needs within the policy formation process.

### **Framework & Methodology**

The Kirkpatrick model of program evaluation was used to assess the training program (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016). The model is a four-tiered programmatic evaluation process that measures participants' reaction, learning, application, and implementation. In this pilot study, a purposive sample of known agricultural nonprofit members in one U. S. state were contacted via email to participate in an online training and up to three surveys. Surveys were completed in Qualtrics through links embedded in an online course created in Articulate Rise. Participants were asked to complete a pre- and post-course knowledge assessment, along with questions pertaining to the quality and applicability of the course content. The survey employed both quantitative and qualitative measures, to assess knowledge gain and to allow participants to provide specific open-response feedback regarding learning and application of the intervention. Knowledge checks were closed-response and analyzed with a paired t-test in SPSS, while open-response applicability questions were analyzed qualitatively. Open response items were deductively coded to align with the appropriate level of Kirkpatrick's model (Saldaña, 2021).

## Results

A paired t-test showed a significant mean difference between pre-test ( $M=61.49$ ,  $SD=29.70$ ) and post-test ( $M=64.09$ ,  $SD=30.42$ ) scores, with participants scoring higher after completing the online course with a small effect size ( $d=0.17$ ) (see Table 1). Ninety-two percent of learners found the course information useful, and 76 percent of learners would recommend the course to a friend. When asked, “Do you see yourself applying what you learned in this course?” 84 percent of learners answered Yes, and 12 percent answered Maybe.

**Table 1**

*Pre- and post-course knowledge gain*

	<b>N</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>P</b>
Pre-test	32	61.49	29.70	<.001
Post-test	32	64.09	30.42	

Learners were asked to list one to two things they could implement right away to apply what they learned. Several learners stated they would prepare for a meeting with legislators ahead of time with an agenda, talking points, or a one-pager. Two learners noted an increased importance in sharing their own stories and experiences with others, and another shared the need to engage the younger generation in advocacy efforts early. Others planned to work with organization leaders to clarify their organization’s mission and vision, and develop a plan to improve communication with group members. Learners also cited a better understanding of IRS policies that govern nonprofit lobbying. Learner feedback indicated an acquisition of new knowledge and intention to apply new knowledge, the primary goal of the online training.

A post-post survey was emailed to participants 30 days after course completion to evaluate the application component of Kirkpatrick’s evaluation model. Learners were asked an open response question: “Have you applied anything you learned from the advocacy and communication course? If so, please provide examples.” Responses included sharing information with others, using new tactics when communicating to be more effective, speaking with organization leaders to improve communication with membership, looking for ways to get involved locally with policy discussions, and incorporating advocacy into youth activities to share with the younger generation.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Participants responded favorably to the online training, as evidenced by the increased knowledge score, positive feedback, and application ideas shared in post-course surveys. Participants shared meaningful takeaways and a desire to apply new knowledge both personally and professionally through storytelling, increased awareness of agricultural policy issues, engaging other groups such as youth, and working with their current organizations to improve how they are able to execute their organization’s mission and communicate with members and legislators. Although the implementation phase of Kirkpatrick’s model was not evaluated within our timeframe, the responses shared suggest the potential for broad impact on agricultural advocacy. Further research is needed to determine the viability of online advocacy and communication skills training for agricultural producers broadly.

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