Utilizing Student Advocates to Facilitate Farm Safety Initiatives in the Southeastern United States

Allison E. Reaves
University of Kentucky, 325 Cooper Drive
Lexington, KY 40546
(423) 426-7778
Allison.Reaves@uky.edu

Sarah R. Sprayberry
University of Kentucky, 325 Cooper Drive
Lexington, KY 40546
(859) 257-7588
Sarah.Sprayberry@uky.edu

Stacy K. Vincent
Texas A&M University
600 John Kimbrough Blvd
College Station, TX 77845
(979) 321-5722
stacy.vincent@ag.tamu.edu

A. Preston Byrd
2808 Moore Hwy
Tifton, GA 31793
(229) 391-5256
alex.byrd@abac.edu

Kang Namkoong
2126 Skinner Building, University of Maryland,
College Park, MD 20742
(301) 405-6525
namkoong@umd.edu

Yongwook Song
329 Rose St.
Lexington, KY 40506
(859) 257-1257 ext. 82249
ywsong2@uky.edu

Introduction/Need for Innovation

The United States reported 5,283 fatal work injuries in 2023 (BLS, 2024). Despite efforts to mitigate farming accidents via agricultural safety promotion, many small-scale farmers lack structured assessment and advocacy in their communities (Chen, 2020; Doyle et al., 2023). A simultaneous issue arises in agricultural education, with programs seeking more hands-on, experiential learning to connect students with local agriculture. Experiential education has been a useful and prevalent tool for andragogy, hailing an increase in career readiness, academic achievement, and skill development (Matsuo, 2025). The observation and subsequent conclusion that classroom learning in conjunction with real-world application has proven to be more successful in the context of agriculture (Aithal & Mishra, 2024).

The Safe Farm Steward Project (SFS) was implemented to bridge these gaps by enhancing safety awareness in local producers and post-secondary students while providing an experiential, real-world experience for students, allowing them to become more engaged in local communities. The project aims to facilitate student empowerment via structured farm safety evaluations of local farms, offering invaluable feedback to farmers and facilitating safety-mindedness in young agricultural professionals.

How it Works

SFS hosts the overarching goal of bringing awareness and increasing safety practices of farmers across 10 states in the Southeastern U.S. while providing an experiential learning experience to post-secondary students. Specifically, the project provides participating institutions with a 3-day, hands-on farm safety curricula with students to evaluate the safety of local farms based on field-expert-generated criteria. The evaluation process offers supplementary assessment for local farmers and fosters students' local community involvement.

To date, 465 farms and 4,313 pieces of equipment have been evaluated. This year, each institution requires students to complete at least one farm evaluation for grade satisfaction, but a phenomenon of students completing more than required was observed, and urged further project action. In 2024, SFS announced that any student who completes five or more farm evaluations would be named a "Safe Farm Advocate" and receive a press release, a social media post on the project's Facebook, and a project Yeti cup. These students are then allowed to advocate in their communities via workshop facilitation or other local partnerships with the support of SFS.

Results to Date/Implications

While still in infancy, the results of this project component have thus far been profound. Once the announcement and promotion of the student advocate element of this project were made, there was a noticeable increase in the number of students with multiple farm evaluations for the 2024 school year, with two students named advocates. These student advocates have claimed a divine interest in workshop facilitation and have expressed interest in partnerships with local extension offices for outreach initiatives. While advocate A is finalizing student

teaching requirements, advocate B reported having already been advocating for farm safety in his local community via word of mouth.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Future plans of this project element include the execution of Advocate B's proposed workshop, with the planning of such currently underway. Additionally, partnerships with local extension offices are being established to provide advocates with additional community support and connections to local farmers. Holistically, this project component has been advertised as a student-led initiative and will function as such, with guidance and support from the SFS research team. A comprehensive catalog of workshop ideas and materials is being developed by the research team to be presented to new future advocates, allowing them to choose from an inventory if they so choose. This action is aimed at diminishing perceived expectation vagueness and improving participation with the 2025 school year's student advocates. Further research will be conducted to identify the most effective advocacy strategies for these students and project initiatives alike.

Costs/Resources Needed

While SFS is a five-year grant funded by the Southeast Center for Agricultural Health and Injury Prevention and is valued at over $1.2 million, the exact costs associated with the student advocate element remain undetermined. While each post-secondary institution receives an annual stipend of $1,500 for project participation, advocate-specific implementation costs for the 24/25 school year are minimal, as all workshop resources are currently owned by the SFS project or the participating institution. The initiative is being overseen by the research team and a graduate student, who receives a stipend and tuition. Additionally, each advocate is invited to attend SFS's annual conference at Dolly's Dreammore Resort and Spa, with lunch and lodging provided.

References

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