

**The Ag Ed Road Show: A Professional Development Experience for Pre-service
Agriculture Teachers**

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Introduction

Early field-based experiences (EFE) within agricultural education serve as vital components of school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teacher preparation programs, offering preservice teachers structured opportunities to develop professional competence prior to student teaching (Rank & Smalley, 2017; Retallick & Miller, 2007). Pre-service SBAE teachers benefit significantly from such early immersion and structured professional development, as recent studies emphasize. One such study found that integrated technical-pedagogical experiences during teacher-methods courses bolster both skill competency and teaching self-efficacy among future educators (Albritton et al., 2023). The literature further suggests that laboratory-based EFE instruction enhances preparedness in essential program delivery and management tasks (Sanders et al., 2023). Additionally, Trickett et al. (2023) noted the need for immersive, content-specific preparation for preservice teachers to enhance student self-efficacy and prepare them for complex classroom scenarios. Together, these findings underscore a clear need to immerse pre-service teachers early in authentic professional development opportunities, which not only sharpen practical skills but also cultivate confidence and professional identity, ultimately strengthening the preparation and retention of preservice SBAE teachers.

In response, agricultural education stakeholders in Illinois implemented the *Ag Ed Roadshow*, a transformative, immersion-based experience for pre-service SBAE teachers. This EFE takes pre-service agricultural educators to exemplary SBAE programs across the state, where they gain program-planning skills, strengthen pedagogical confidence, and further develop their professional identity, establishing a foundation for long-term success in agricultural education.

How it Works

Our innovative two-day professional development event has been designed to enhance the preparation and retention of pre-service agricultural education majors across Illinois. This initiative is a collaborative effort supported by our Agricultural Education State Staff, STAR Program Committee, University Agricultural Teacher Preparation Programs, Community College Instructors, and industry partners. Held annually each fall semester, the event engages students from the state's universities and community colleges that offer agricultural education coursework.

Day one begins with student networking and immersive industry visits where participants interact with professionals and engage in hands-on experiences. Evening programming often includes leadership games, teambuilding activities, and a shared meal to foster camaraderie among our future educators. Lodging is provided at no cost to the participants. Day two features students taking a charter bus or vans and visiting exemplary high school agricultural education programs in rotating regions of the state. These visits include classroom observations, facility tours, demonstrations of teaching resources, and replication-ready laboratory activities, such as electrical wiring, floral design, and dissection labs. Host teachers and their students often lead sessions, providing authentic learning opportunities for the preservice teachers.

This program not only bridges geographical divides in the state but also equips future agricultural educators with practical tools, statewide networks, and real-world insights. Ultimately, it cultivates a strong sense of belonging and professional identity among pre-service teachers, contributing to stronger recruitment and retention within the profession.

Results to Date

The results from this innovative statewide professional development experience have demonstrated positive impacts on student engagement, professional identity development, and retention in the Illinois agricultural education pipeline. Over the past nine years, 221 pre-service SBAE teachers have participated in this event. Several pre-service teachers return each year, citing their previous participation as transformative in their development as future educators. Of those who have attended, 152 are teaching or are still within the agricultural education pipeline (68.8% retention rate).

Anecdotally, state staff members have observed that participants are more likely to remain engaged throughout their collegiate journey. They are also more likely to seek career guidance and support and to establish relationships with state staff prior to graduation. As one staff member noted, "Sometimes we feel like these pre-service teachers have been part of the profession much longer than they actually have because we have been connected with them for years." Evaluation feedback confirms the event's benefits. One participant shared, "I personally liked it all very much... I loved being able to see what these other schools do and what their environments look like." Another noted, "The best part... was being able to talk to the current teachers to get ideas and advice for what the next few years will hold." These findings suggest the experience has strengthened student understanding of the field and created supportive cohorts, better preparing them for successful transitions into the profession.

Future Plans & Advice to Others

Plans are firmly in place to continue this innovative professional development event, with significant National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE) STAR Program funding allocated to ensure its sustainability. As participation has grown, recent challenges have included rising costs and logistical complexities associated with large group sizes. To address these issues, organizers have strategically partnered with multi-teacher agriculture programs, enabling smaller breakout groups and more effective hands-on engagement. Additionally, industry sponsors have been instrumental in offsetting costs, further supporting the program's expansion. While centrally located events tend to yield higher attendance, rotating the location remains a priority to provide returning participants with exposure to diverse school programs across the state.

For others seeking to implement a similar initiative, the most critical recommendation is to involve university agricultural education faculty in both planning and recruitment. Illinois benefits from a strong partnership among its universities and community colleges offering agricultural education, whose faculty collaborate to select dates and promote student participation. This collective effort significantly enhances outreach and ensures consistency in messaging and expectations.

Cost & Resources Needed

Implementing this event requires careful financial planning and strategic resource allocation. The total annual cost of the event is approximately \$6,000. Major expense categories include lodging, transportation, food, and supplies for hands-on professional development activities. NAAE STAR Program funding has been instrumental in sustaining the program's success. Costs are partially offset by generous contributions from industry partners. To replicate this model, key resources include reliable funding is essential. Equally essential is the thoughtful selection of host school sites to provide a comprehensive view of agricultural education. Sites are chosen to showcase a range of facilities and instructional approaches. This intentional diversity ensures that students gain exposure to varied teaching environments and curricular emphases, thereby broadening their perspectives and equipping them with adaptable models for their future classrooms.

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