

**Advising in Action: Preparing Pre-Service Agricultural Educators Through Field Day Leadership**

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### **Need for Idea**

Teacher attrition is a continuously pressing issue within the agricultural education profession. In just one year, thirty states across the nation reported losing seventy percent of agricultural education positions; many ultimately closing entire programs due to insufficient candidates (Norris et al., 2024). Research has demonstrated stressors, like FFA/ Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) responsibilities, can contribute to attrition if not handled properly, especially for women in the field (King et al., 2013). A large component of being a school-based agriculture education (SBAE) teacher is advising an FFA chapter, including preparing students for competitive events, performing administrative tasks, and working with community members (Best et al., 2025). While advising an FFA chapter is a major responsibility of being an SBAE teacher, many preservice teachers report feeling a lack of confidence managing components of FFA, some even overwhelmed (Norris & Hill, 2024). To prevent this inadequacy, the University of Kentucky Field Day event was implemented into coursework to provide pre-service SBAE teachers with a major experiential learning opportunity to gain practice in FFA events and management. Moving pre-service educators beyond roles of observing and volunteering and into a management position. This effort aims to prevent future SBAE teacher loss due to lack of preparedness by providing valuable experiences during the pre-service phase of their teaching.

### **How it Works**

Established in 1970, the University of Kentucky Field Day has impacted nearly 50 generations of high school agricultural students from three states (University of Kentucky, n.d.). To prepare pre-service teachers for demanding FFA/SAE responsibilities— factors that frequently contribute to teacher attrition (King et al., 2013)— pre-service teachers must complete AEA 371: Advising a Non-Profit Youth Organization to receive their degree. A core requirement of AEA 371 is planning and superintending one of 24 UK Field Day contests, which mirror state-level FFA Leadership Development Events (LDE), Career Development Events (CDE), or 4-H events. This project develops critical competencies in preparing students for competition, performing administrative tasks, and engaging with community members.

To fulfill this goal, AEA 371 requirements follow Kolb's (2001) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). ELT defines development as a recursive cycle of four stages: Active Experimentation, Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, and Abstract Conceptualization. Mastery occurs as learners navigate this loop multiple times, deepening understanding with every rotation (Kolb, 2001). Pre-service teachers begin with Active Experimentation by planning a designated contest (Kolb, 2001). They collaborate with departments to secure resources and volunteers, identify contest components, and develop scoring systems. They then shift to Concrete Experience to complete the task (Kolb, 2001). Pre-service teachers execute their plans by setting up facilities, preparing judge packets, and facilitating the event for secondary students on contest day. Afterward, teachers enter Reflective Observation to learn from the experience (Kolb, 2001). Pre-service teachers submit written reflections and participate in class discussions to identify

improvements and "lessons learned" for future agricultural educators. Finally, they move into Abstract Conceptualization, translating reflections into logical "rules of thumb" (Kolb, 2001). By analyzing their reflections, pre-service teachers build mental models for critical teaching competencies: preparing future students for competition, performing administrative duties, and community engagement. As ELT is recursive, these teachers will continue to solidify these competencies as they encounter similar professional challenges.

### **Results and Implications**

For over twenty years, the AEA 371 course has been an integral part of Field Day success. This collaboration provides pre-service teachers with the opportunity to deepen their knowledge of 4-H and FFA competitions, while allowing hands-on application of content learned throughout their course. This event also provides networking opportunities for all organizations involved. Pre-service educators establish rapport with contest sponsors and can network with future colleagues within the profession. Additionally, it creates opportunities for potential high school students to explore higher education opportunities within the agricultural education and advocacy degree path.

### **Future Plans**

The implementation of the Field Day event into pre-service educator's coursework aims to provide future teachers with experience in various components of FFA and 4-H. These experiences can be used in their future programs when preparing students for competitive events or facilitating local contests. To expand the implementation of Field Day into the coursework, we plan to offer more student-ran contests through Field Day in the coming years. With more contests becoming available, we hope to offer more opportunities related to 4-H for our AEA 371 students who are interested in careers within extension. Additionally, there is potential for multiple studies to come out of Field Day. In the coming year, we plan to measure our undergraduates' self-efficacy in student teaching in relation to their experience with Field Day through AEA 371. Reaching further, we plan to study our alumni population by surveying those who identify as early career SBAE teachers to see how their experience participating in Field Day impacted their first year's teaching.

### **Cost/ Resources needed**

The pre-service agricultural educators participating in the facilitation of the Field Day event have no cost required of them. Any registered student in the "Advising a Non-Profit Youth Organization" course is eligible to participate. However, some contests require materials to be facilitated. To provide these materials for the contests, students are responsible for finding sponsors and partnerships. Students often work with businesses across the state as well as University faculty to gain resources. Many departments across the college donate materials for contests such as land evaluation, veterinary science, and dairy evaluation. Our local stockyards, one of our strongest partnerships, also provides livestock for our livestock evaluation contest annually. With participation in Field Day, pre-service educators receive a free lunch and T-Shirt provided by the college agricultural education and advocacy department.

### Resources

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