

**From Classroom to Gallery: An Industry-Supported Public Exhibition in Agricultural
Photography Education**

Tanya Hamner
Assistant Professor of Practice
Texas A&M University
hamnert@tamu.edu

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

Photography is a fundamental component of agricultural communications, requiring graduates to create compelling visual content that informs, promotes, and advocates for agriculture. In addition to mastering technical skills such as exposure, lighting, composition, and visual storytelling, skilled photographers must select, prepare, present, and communicate their work to clients and diverse public audiences (Barnbaum, 2020; Barrett, 2020). However, traditional agricultural photography courses frequently conclude with students submitting digital images solely for instructor evaluation, limiting opportunities to experience the complete professional process or engage real-world agricultural stakeholders. Authentic learning experiences allow students to apply classroom knowledge in settings that closely resemble professional practice. Experiential learning increases student engagement, motivation, and knowledge retention, while authentic projects help students connect theory with application and develop transferable career skills (James, 2020; Kong, 2021). Likewise, student exhibitions are recognized high-impact learning experiences that promote collaboration, critical thinking, and professional skill development by requiring students to produce work for audiences beyond the classroom (Anderson et al., 2022). In agricultural communications specifically, presenting visual media to public audiences empowers students to bridge the gap between agricultural producers and the public while gaining real-time professional feedback. To address this instructional gap, I redesigned an agricultural photography course to end with a public gallery exhibition supported by an industry collaboration with Lucchese Bootmaker. Rather than ending the semester with a digital portfolio submission, students prepared exhibition-quality work reflecting authentic commercial and lifestyle photography experiences while presenting their photographs to the public.

How It Works

Throughout the 15-week semester, students complete photography assignments that intentionally build toward the public exhibition. During Weeks 1 through 6, students develop core technical competencies through assignments emphasizing camera operation, exposure, depth of field, composition, lighting, color, and visual storytelling. Frequent classroom critiques provide opportunities for peer feedback and revision, helping students build confidence before instructor evaluation. In Weeks 7 through 12, students participate in an industry collaboration with Lucchese Bootmaker, producing commercial photographs that require them to consider branding, lighting, composition, product presentation, and client expectations. Students also complete a lifestyle photography project emphasizing authentic storytelling through agricultural and western imagery. These assignments require students to integrate multiple concepts while producing portfolio-quality photographs. Images from these projects frequently become the strongest exhibition selections because they represent authentic professional work created throughout the semester. During Weeks 13 through 15, students review their portfolios and select photographs for exhibition. Students prepare exhibition-quality prints, professionally mat their work, assist with installing the gallery, and host the public exhibition. Faculty, administrators, industry professionals, family, and community members are invited to attend. Throughout the exhibition, students discuss technical decisions, creative choices, and stories behind their

photographs, providing an authentic professional experience extending beyond traditional classroom assessment.

Results to Date/Implications

This innovative approach was implemented in Spring 2026 with 25 students. Student feedback and observational data indicated that the experience was highly engaging, creating a meaningful environment where students took greater ownership of their work. Once students recognized their photographs would be viewed by an authentic public audience, they devoted additional time to refining edits in Adobe Lightroom and Photoshop, improving image selection, and seeking instructor feedback before final printing. Although students could select photographs from any assignment, images created during the Lucchese Bootmaker collaboration were most frequently selected for display because students were proud of their work. Observing students defend their creative choices provided valuable insight into their conceptual understanding and technical growth. Participating in the public exhibition strengthened students' oral communication skills as they articulated camera settings, lighting choices, composition strategies, and storytelling narratives with gallery visitors. Overall portfolio quality was noticeably higher than in previous semesters, demonstrating that authentic public presentation drives student motivation and skill mastery.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

The potential for incorporating public exhibitions into agricultural communications curricula is tremendous. Research confirms that authentic presentation experiences enhance critical thinking, professional identity, and student engagement (Anderson et al., 2022; James, 2020). However, organizing gallery events presents logistical challenges if not planned early. My advice centers on purposeful scaffolding and early coordination. Instructors should establish gallery venues early, incorporate structured peer critiques to ensure print readiness, and leverage industry partnerships for authentic project briefs. Utilizing campus gallery spaces or department hallways allows instructors to create high-impact learning environments without incurring facility costs. I plan to expand this model by integrating additional agricultural industry partners in future semesters.

Costs/Resources Needed

The exhibition model utilizes existing institutional resources combined with modest direct consumable expenses, making it highly transferable and affordable. Existing resources leveraged include departmental DSLR/mirrorless camera kits, basic studio lighting gear, university-provided Adobe Creative Cloud software licenses, and zero-cost campus venue spaces. For my Spring exhibition, I utilized the university Education Gallery at no venue cost, while my Fall exhibition utilized department building hallway display spaces. The total direct cost for a 25-student cohort was approximately \$900 (~\$35 per student). Direct expenses included professional printing at \$25 per student (\$625 total), pre-cut matting boards purchased from Hobby Lobby (~\$75 total), gallery mounting hardware (~\$50 total), and light food and beverages for the opening reception (~\$150 total). Costs can be covered through departmental lab fees, internal grants, industry sponsorship, or direct student purchase.

References

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