Innovative Idea

Agricultural EDbassadors: Paving the Way for a New Cadre of Agricultural Educators

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

The National Council for Agricultural Education has established a goal to increase the number of secondary Ag programs nationwide to 10,000 by the year 2015 (Loudenslager, 2006). Even though there has been an increased demand for secondary Ag educators, there are several factors impeding progress, including a decline in enrollment in Ag teacher education programs and an increase in the number of teacher candidates choosing not to teach. It was expected in 2007 that only 53% of the new teachers would take a teaching position after graduation, leaving 38% of vacant positions unfilled (Kantrovich, 2007). Research shows that increasing students' interest in Ag education will potentially result in more successful recruitment processes, thus increasing student enrollment and the number of highly qualified Ag teachers (Esters, 2007).

Therefore, to attract students, we must reach out to a variety of populations, provide students with an understanding of the importance of Ag education to the sustainability of society, provide early experiences so that students understand the responsibilities of an Ag educator, and create a connection between students' passions and those responsibilities (Vincent, Ball, & Anderson, 2009). To this end, an Ag literacy program was developed that gives high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors a unique opportunity to promote Ag education in elementary and middle schools in their area as part of a statewide team.

How It Works

The program consisted of a residential 2- or 7-week summer orientation, or 4-day winter orientation. The duration was based on the agricultural background of the student. The 2-week program was for students enrolled in an urban Ag program. The 4-day program was for students enrolled in a traditional Ag program. Both programs consisted of all-day agricultural education curriculum development training. Finally, the 7-week program was for urban students who were participating in a summer Ag research program at the university and consisted of 2-hour agricultural education curriculum development training lessons throughout the summer. An additional component of agricultural business tours was added to the 2- and 7-week programs as a way to expose these urban students to the vast options of careers in agriculture for which Ag teachers prepare students. At the time of application, students must have a minimum G.P.A. of 2.5/4.0, have successfully completed three Ag classes with a minimum G.P.A. of 3.0, and a recommendation from their Ag teacher or the director of the college research program. In addition, participants must have identified one elementary school to partner with and presented the lesson to at minimum four classes or 100 students. All applicants that met the aforementioned requirements were accepted to the program.

The program was coordinated by a paid Ag education student. This student's responsibility was to recruit students through the state Ag education listserv and FFA events; develop and send out all correspondence; schedule meeting rooms, guest presenters, lessons, activities, tours and meals; and chaperone students. During the orientations, agricultural education faculty and students taught participants about the importance of Ag literacy,

characteristics of effective presenters, Ag literacy resources for educators, student learning styles, how to develop a lesson plan, and effective use of visuals. In addition, group enrichment activities were planned in the evening to help encourage team cohesion. After developing the 30 minute Ag literacy lesson of their choice, participants were able to practice and receive peer and instructor feedback on the lesson's content and the presentation style and flow. At the end of the orientation, participants received an instructional case with all the supplies and materials needed to conduct 100 presentations, permission letters for school administrators, presentation evaluation forms and a thank you gift for the elementary school teachers, small giveaways for their presentations, and an Ag EDbassador polo to wear while presenting.

Results to Date/Implications

Twenty-three students from across the state were selected to participate in the program and completed orientation. Of those, 17 completed the presentations reaching 1749 elementary students. The lessons included topics dealing with nutrition, Ag commodities, Ag careers, recycling, and leadership development. The feedback from both the Ag EDbassadors and the participating schools was very positive. Most common statements from teachers were that the presentation was very engaging; the presenter was prepared and professional; and they would participate in the program again. The most common statement from the Ag EDbassadors was that they really enjoyed presenting and would definitely like to pursue more experiences in Ag literacy. Although there were only 6 strong commitments for going into Ag education as a major, this program is successful in that it is beginning to make more students aware of this option. It is important to realize that substantive contact with students is necessary to develop the relationships needed to increase interest in Ag education. In a survey, high school students rated 12 recruitment strategies with the opportunity to visit colleges and interact with faculty as the only one with a “very effective” rating (Betts & Newcomb, 1986). Furthermore, expanding Ag literacy and instruction outside of the vocational classroom will introduce Ag practices to more students and prepare them to make a decision to pursue agriculture (Thompson & Russell, 1993).

Future Plans

Unfortunately, many students do not have a complete understanding of the type of careers available to them in agriculture, particularly in education; therefore, this program innovatively addresses the issue. We realize that it will take some time to fully realize the benefits of this program, but we believe that it is worth the effort to continue it using the 4-day model. The 4-day model proved to be just as effective as the other options but more cost effective and easier to schedule. In addition, the program has become increasingly popular with Ag teachers in the state.

Costs/Resources Needed

The three variations was funded by the state department of education for $25,000. This included a stipend for the faculty member ($2500) and student worker ($2000), residential housing for all participants ($4000), three meals a day ($3500), instructional supplies and materials ($2000), student presentation supplies and materials ($2200), travel and fieldtrips ($5000), parent/student reception ($3000), and group enrichment activities ($800). A 4-day, all inclusive program with all the aforementioned costs included would cost approximately $700 per student for a group of 20 students if hosted at a hotel near campus to have access to a classroom.

References

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