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## Extension Professionals Support Agricultural Education Career Awareness

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## Extension Professionals Support Agricultural Education Career Awareness

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**Abstract.** The COVID-19–induced moratorium on campus visits allowed faculty from University of Missouri’s Agricultural Education & Leadership (AEL) program and Missouri Extension time to reconsider our campus visit structure and be more purposeful in our recruitment efforts. We organized a showcase to expose high school students to career paths and help them understand how our program could help prepare them for career success in the formal agriculture classroom, Extension, or the agriculture field. We urge extension professionals to consider how they can be involved with events that raise students’ awareness about career opportunities while simultaneously recruiting the next generation of extension employees.

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### INTRODUCTION/NEED FOR IDEA

High school student visits to university campuses ended abruptly during 2020–2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This halt was alarming, particularly because incoming college students identify campus visits as the most impactful source of information when deciding to attend a particular university (Cletzer et al., 2021; Rocca, 2013). In addition to providing a general feel for a campus, visits afford students contact with faculty members and current students, both of whom are reported as influential on college choice (Alston et al., 2019, 2020; Cletzer et al., 2021).

The COVID-19–induced moratorium on campus visits allowed faculty from the University of Missouri’s Agricultural Education & Leadership (AEL) program and Missouri Extension faculty time to reconsider our campus visit structure and be more purposeful in our recruitment efforts. AEL faculty opted to host a 1-day, all-day event, which we dubbed the AEL Showcase, for high school students when campus reopened in the fall of 2021. The purpose of the event was to highlight the AEL degree program and its emphasis areas and help students understand the range of career options available.

State and regional Extension professionals were important in the recruitment of high school students for this career exploration event. Because Extension professionals have existing relationships with youth, they are a trusted source of information for youth and their families. Additionally, they have access to LISTSERVs that include students in this age range. We also used agriculture teachers throughout the state to help us spread the word to high school students.

Drawing on recent literature related to Gen-Z students’ college decision-making processes (e.g., Alston et al., 2020; Cletzer et al., 2021; Loveland, 2017; Mohr & Mohr, 2017; Rickes, 2016), we hosted an event focusing primarily on the top-level concerns for Gen-Z students entering a college of agriculture, including (a) opportunities after graduation, (b) how our program prepares a student for employment, and (c) return on investment (Cletzer et al., 2021).

Prospective students are not always aware of career opportunities available in the broad and diverse field of agriculture (Baker & Abrams, 2011). The goal of the showcase was to expose students to career paths and opportunities in all facets of agricultural education, communications, and leadership while simultaneously raising aware-

ness about opportunities at the University of Missouri. We wanted them to understand how our program could help prepare them for career success in the formal agriculture classroom, Extension, or the agriculture industry.

## HOW IT WORKS

The AEL Showcase was designed by using social cognitive career theory as a program theory (Lent et al., 1994). Social cognitive career theory states that learning experiences influence self-efficacy expectations and outcome expectations. These factors then further influence students' interests, goals, and actions. Learning experiences, such as the AEL Showcase, could potentially affect students' career decisions.

AEL faculty members, graduate students, and Extension faculty worked together to plan and organize a day of activities that would be engaging for high school students. The purpose of the day's workshops was to help these students gain knowledge and skills in areas related to a variety of careers in agricultural education.

Participants in the AEL Showcase included 24 high school students (18 female, six male) from 15 different high schools. The group included one sophomore, seven juniors, and 16 seniors. Some highlights of the day included the following:

- An AEL professor facilitated "Teaching Ag in Action." This workshop gave participants an inside look at what it might be like to serve as a school-based agricultural educator or nonformal agricultural educator. Participants took part in a strawberry DNA extraction lesson, an active learning approach to learning about biotechnology. Additionally, participants discussed the federal law requiring labeling of genetically engineered foods that went into effect on January 1, 2022.
- AEL faculty and an Extension faculty member facilitated "Communications in Action." This workshop focused on helping students clearly communicate their newly acquired information about biotechnology. Participants were tasked with designing and recording a podcast about agricultural technology and the most recent food-labeling regulations. Students worked in teams to create their podcasts and used Anchor podcast-hosting technology.
- Selected University of Missouri AEL students hosted "R.I.S.E. Power Hour" for participants. These university students facilitated roundtable discussions with participants about four important opportunities within the college: research, international study, service, and experiential learning. They also explained to participants how these experiences had supplemented their classroom education at the University of Missouri.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Looking back on our inaugural event, two lessons are clear. Other universities considering developing similar events may find these lessons to be helpful.

### TAKE TIME TO INCORPORATE ACTIVE LEARNING

Students are highly engaged when they are actively participating in the learning process. Through their involvement in the DNA extraction experiment and the creation of podcasts in small groups, the students learned about how to communicate advanced scientific information in a much more interesting way than by only listening to a lecture. Although active learning takes planning and time, the engagement makes it well worth the effort.

### NEAR-PEER MENTORS ARE POWERFUL ROLE MODELS

The college students who helped with the AEL Showcase were only a few years older than our participants, making them near-peer mentors. Because the college students faced the same challenge of deciding on college and career opportunities in recent years, they still vividly remembered the struggles and related well with the high school participants. High school students seemed to feel comfortable asking them questions about college experiences that they may not have asked adults. It is important to select near-peer mentors who are responsible and mature to ensure success.

### IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Extension professionals should realize the influence they have over young people. Arnold and Place (2010) listed influential relationships and positive encouragement with career professionals as an important factor when students consider a career in Extension. We urge Extension professionals to consider how they can be involved with events that may help raise students' awareness about college opportunities while simultaneously recruiting the next generation of Extension employees.

One rural Missouri Extension professional brought high school students to this event from a remote part of the state because she "knew their families couldn't afford the trip." Several high school teachers and parents were also present throughout the day. Universities wanting to implement this idea should consider hosting a session to help chaperones learn more about the degree program and career opportunities while students are participating in the workshops. This activity would also be an excellent opportunity to highlight other Extension programs.

Future plans include conducting longitudinal research to understand how the AEL Showcase learning experience informs high school student participants' college decision-making process. This research is important to ensure that events designed to help students make college choices and career decisions are working as intended and yielding the desired long-term outcomes.

Additionally, there is a need to explore and address barriers that may be prohibiting all students access to learning experiences, such as the AEL Showcase. Perceived social status and other demographic factors influence students' exposure to learning experiences outside the classroom (Thompson & Dahling, 2012). Extension professionals should consider the role they can play in helping youth and their families alleviate these barriers.

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