

Rediscovering Leadership and Career Growth in Co-Curricular Youth Organizations

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Youth development organizations may be more relevant today than ever before in relation to addressing critical grand challenges. Effective education programs allow engagement with not only the next generation of agricultural workforce members, but future policy developers, elected officials, and voters as we engage in this social contract of engagement around food, fiber and natural resources. In agriculture, we have an urgent need to inform future producers, as well as consumers, about effective and efficient practices - as well as to outline the challenges and opportunities in our industry. As we develop future leaders, they need not only technical skills, but also the career readiness skills and interpersonal skills that the 21st century demands like collaboration, creativity, critical thinking and communication. Co-curricular organizations provide the leadership laboratories to accompany the rigorous technical agriscience curriculum to develop those critical capacities and help provide a well-rounded agricultural education program and experience.



Career Development Events

- Diverse array of 26 competitive events offered at the national level
- Tied to curriculum
- Team and individual opportunities
- Industry relevant and skill-based



Proficiency Awards

- Awarded to students with outstanding Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAEs)
- Suited to developing skills and growth outside of the classroom



Leadership Opportunities

- Personal growth and teambuilding
- Local (chapter, district, region, state, and national officers)
- Committee work for programs and events
- Running effective meetings
- Public speaking

Figure 1 Holistic opportunities for leadership development in the National FFA, a co-curricular organization

Co-Curricular?

Co-curricular means that technical agricultural skills are being taught in a structured format with a student organization providing additional opportunities for hands-on application of those skills and other leadership skills. Co-curricular organizations can play a key role in letting students take ownership of their learning in a way that fits the unique context of their individual aspirations and dreams. The structure of engaging student agency and amplifying student voice of co-curricular organizations is powerful, allowing the primary constituency of the students themselves to be empowered

and allows allied stakeholders (i.e., teachers, volunteers, mentors, parents, etc.) involved to make real and lasting impacts.

An important concept is that co-curricular organizations are not confined to specific demographic or geographic characteristics. Although FFA and 4-H programs in the U.S. were historically found in rural, agricultural communities, today's co-curricular organizations thrive in wide-ranging and diverse environments. Public education students in urban, suburban, rural areas, as well as students in private education or homeschool settings, all have opportunities to develop and apply skills that are learned in their unique engagement in agricultural education programming. Co-curricular organizations can thrive anywhere and do not need to be connected to a larger organization; rather, they can start in conjunction with a structured learning environment and interested participants.

Co-curricular organizations provide structure to harness youth agency and empower students. Organizations host competitive events focused on specific career and/or leadership skills that allow the student to actively practice, engage, and apply their knowledge. For example, In the National FFA Organization, students are provided opportunities to participate in competition-based Career Development Events (CDEs) and/or Leadership Development Events. In addition, they can submit their documented work-based learning records, called Supervised Agricultural Experiences, to earn recognition through degrees and proficiency awards. Finally, students are presented authentic opportunities to cultivate their leadership organization in which they are members. *Figure 1* shows characteristics of each of these areas of leadership development through a co-curricular organization. Specific examples are provided below.

Competitive Events

Competitive events (known in the National FFA Organization as Career Development Events and Leadership Development Events) can be effective in harnessing extrinsic motivation in youth to “win” that has the potential to evolve into intrinsically motivated desire to master content or concepts related to a career area or leadership skills. The events are most effective when they are an extension of the curriculum being taught as opposed to simply being a competition offered as a stand-alone event. Teams or individuals can engage in events that assess learning of the curriculum and have input from industry stakeholders to ensure that they are valid and relevant to that career area. An



example (illustrated in Photo A) is the Poultry Evaluation Career Development Event. Teams of students engage in various skills relevant to poultry production and the poultry industry as designed by an industry evaluation group such as

carcass evaluation. Students are awarded plaques, ribbons, trophies, and occasionally scholarships, based on performance.

Proficiency Awards

Proficiency Awards are examples of awards used to reward students for effectively developing and documenting work-based learning around their career interests. Students can engage in work-based learning opportunities that include entrepreneurial efforts where the student assumes all risk, placement projects where the student is employed by someone else, or agriscience research projects where the student designs and collects data addressing an agricultural related problem or challenge. Photo B



illustrates a student sharing, and in-effect peer teaching, his goat entrepreneurship project with fellow members of his chapter. Students can document time and financial investment to earn degrees in the organization and/or proficiency awards to document technical mastery and excellence.



Leadership Development

A co-curricular organization cannot exist entirely on the development of specific technical skills or individual success. Solving the grand challenges of the world will take a capacity to work as a team and have the dispositions of a servant-leader. These organizations provide a form of “laboratory space” for students to learn leadership and apply different leadership styles or approaches as they grow and mature into effective agents of change. An example of these opportunities include the democratic elections of student officers to represent the organization. These officers lead their peers in the

development of the organizational plan of work including activities for individual member development, chapter/club team development or community engagement. More structured organizations can provide opportunities for differentiated instruction by allowing high-performing students to advance to higher levels in the organization (i.e., district, state or national officer positions). Photo C illustrates a group of students applying technical landscaping/horticulture skills in a community service event at a local retirement home with the event being organized and led by a local student officer team.

Community Involvement

Co-curricular organizations are most impactful when they involve the broader community in which they are operating. Caring adults can share their knowledge and experience as teachers, coaches, and mentors for youth. Intergenerational engagement opportunities create vibrant, strong communities for all. Many late-career adults have talents that they want to share and co-curricular organizations can be a great outlet for their mentoring. Early-career adults may have the bug to “give-back” already, or they may be part of the millennial generation and want to be involved in projects that make an impact. Co-curricular organizations can use these adults to provide real-world examples that bring life to their textbook lessons. When we engage members in our community, we all win.

Specific examples of community engagement for the opportunities illustrated above could include identifying community experts to serve as coaches for competitive events; community members to employ students in agricultural pursuits or mentor the students’ entrepreneurial efforts and finally, the co-development of community service events between the agricultural youth co-curricular organization and other civic groups in the shared community space. These opportunities help develop a sense of civic pride in the youth and an understanding that they are not operating alone in a vacuum in their educational journey.



While co-curricular organizations create opportunities for students to take control of their own learning, adult leaders can really make an impact on a student’s life by teaching them a skill and providing honest feedback for improvement. Previous research demonstrates that coaches are effective if they show interest in the students and are dedicated to helping them improve their skills. No specific personality trait or characteristics of adult leaders have been identified that significantly impacted student’s performance, nor was student performance impacted by an adult leader’s past experience with the youth organization. This means that any adult can truly be themselves, be authentic and engage in cultivating the next generation of agricultural leadership. Students resonate with adults who are genuine with them. Many adults are unfamiliar with student co-curricular organizations, but they have the skills and experiences that students need. These valuable community members and partners simply need to be asked to be involved. This awareness of engaging all human resources in a community is perhaps the most critical task of the youth co-curricular organization adult leader.

Agriculturally-oriented youth co-curricular organizations can help students and communities work efficiently to reach solutions and ask better questions of the challenges we have in agriculture. Co-curricular student organizations hold the potential to transform students and their communities. For examples and inspiration on how you can be involved in co-curricular youth organizations, please explore the organizational websites ffa.org and 4-h.org.



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