

November 12, 2007

A Strategic Plan for Agricultural Education An Invitation for Dialogue

Introduction and Background

It is said that growth is vital for the continued health of all living things. This organic principle appears to apply equally well to institutions and communal organizations.

Some may see the call to increase the number of quality agricultural education programs as merely a means to boost the number of students wearing the blue and gold corduroy jacket. This view does not recognize the economic, educational and societal benefits that can be realized with this call for growth and quality in agricultural education programs. The long-range strategic goal of realizing 10,000 quality agricultural education (science) programs by the year 2015 in which every student has a quality SAE and is an engaged member of the FFA student organization is much more than a goal for growth's sake. It is being argued that this vision is vital for the continued health and well-being of the nation.

The educational debate around accountability, standards, rigor, relevance and relationships is now a timely opportunity for our profession to thoughtfully address the philosophical tenets of the educational delivery system of agricultural education. If the leadership of the profession concurs that there continues to exist a strong case for the three-circle model of rigorous and relevant technical instruction focusing on the science, business and technology of agriculture coupled with experiential learning and character and leadership development opportunities in and outside the classroom, then now is the time to take strategic, bold and aggressive steps to recast, mold and position our program so that it can serve as a model for all of education. If we are prepared to be bold, we have the potential to position and empower agricultural education to be a guiding force for agriculture and provide leadership for the nation.

In addition to self-serving industry and organizational interests, the author also recognizes that each generation questions the ability and willingness of those that follow to be prepared to fill the leadership roles in the private and public sectors. His generation is no different in desiring an educational system that will help ensure tomorrow's leaders have the technical and leadership skills and the moral fiber to advance humankind.

This sincere desire to meet the economic and societal concerns outlined is evidence for a thorough exploration of the rationale and potential strategies necessary for growing the number of quality agricultural education programs in this country. The profession would be well-served if it made a high priority of including all stakeholders (students, teachers, state staff, teacher education, business and industry, AEROs, etc.) as well as what has traditionally been considered non-interested parties (leaders in academic instruction, land grant institutions, guidance counselors, economic development specialists, agricultural and consumer organizations and others) into this important discussion.

The author is quick to note that he and the organization he represents are not claiming the ability to craft a definitive “bold” master plan for all of agricultural education.

Recognizing that the student organization, FFA, has a vested interest in a strong and vibrant agricultural education, there is an urgency to advance this discussion. A dialogue is needed on how agricultural education can best serve all constituencies in agriculture as well as across local and global communities. The thoughts and ideas reflected in this paper are simply offered as a tool to hopefully initiate and advance the dialogue on this subject.

Agricultural Education Today

Agricultural education is much different today than thirty years ago. When one considers various measurements used historically to determine what constitutes a “quality” agricultural education program, a bottom-line appraisal can be somewhat discouraging. A lower percentage of students taking an agricultural course today will find the curriculum rigorous and relevant, let alone providing a sound foundation for post-secondary study in the agricultural sciences. Today, a lower percentage of students are required to complete a quality SAE program or be active, engaged members of the student organization.

In 1977, the FFA reached its highest membership of 511,000. It is expected that within two years we will again reach or exceed that high water mark of 30 years. But will there be pride in that accomplishment? The percentage of agriculture students engaged in both SAEs and the FFA has dropped to nearly 50 percent in too many areas of the country. There are certainly exceptions at the local and state level to this disturbing trend. However, if one truly believes that the three-circle model of relevant, rigorous instruction, experiential learning, and leadership and character development is a superior way of preparing young people to be productive, contributing members in their communities and agriculture, then the situation in which we find ourselves is unacceptable.

Accountability and the expectations of academic rigor are directly and indirectly impacting agricultural education and all of career and technical education (CTE). Scheduling pressures and the reallocation of resources from what some now classify as “non-essential programs” to the more “academic” subjects are affecting the ability of agriculture instructors to provide a quality program that is available to all students. CTE is again being challenged to prove its value and relevance as the current federal budget proposal zeroes out all Perkins funding for career and technical education. There is, however, a growing recognition that CTE’s experiential learning pedagogy can teach academic content in a context that can also provide foundational career and life skills.

Agricultural education’s record of attracting and serving a diverse student body is mixed at best. We have made great progress in gender and geographic (rural, urban and suburban) diversification. But, the goal of attracting and fully engaging all students of color and varied socio-economic means and locales has been elusive.

All is not dark. It is suggested that our current national labor environment and societal needs could be providing opportunities for agricultural education's program enhancement and growth. Virtually all of business and industry is acutely concerned about its ability to fill positions at all levels in the future. As the baby boom generation continues to march into retirement at ever-increasing rates, the prospect of skilled labor shortages are both real and alarming. Successfully meeting the needs of agribusiness by ensuring an adequate supply of individuals with the necessary technical and leadership skills would be met by enthusiastic support that could be translated into providing key resources for agricultural education. Because we have nearly 80 years experience in successfully helping students take steps toward achieving their personal and career goals, there is an untapped reservoir of resources and support.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture recognizes that 17 percent of the domestic workforce is engaged in over 300 careers related to the production, processing, marketing, distribution and management of food, fiber and natural resources. Yet, we in agricultural education are not serving 17 percent of today's student population. Moreover, while the trade gap has narrowed, this country continues to be a net exporter of agricultural products. Compared with Japan, which is able to produce only 40 percent of its annual caloric needs domestically, the United States has historically enjoyed a strong economic contribution from its agricultural sector.

Recognizing that many positions in agriculture require post-secondary training, can we not use the strategic long-range goal as an opportunity to evolve beyond the traditional view of agricultural education as essentially a secondary program? By engaging post-secondary leadership from all disciplines in this dialogue, strategies can be identified that allow students to truly have a seamless educational experience.

Even so, concerns about food safety, security and independence are beginning to register at the highest levels of agribusiness and government. The aging of U.S. farmers (57 is the average age) is a growing concern. The recent series of Farm Bill Forums conducted by Secretary of Agriculture Johanns called attention to a potential storm cloud on the horizon. Every meeting was initiated with a question asking how the farm bill should be designed to enhance the opportunities for the next generation to enter production agriculture. In addition, opportunities abound for real growth in virtually all sectors of the U.S. agriculture industry.

Can a compelling case now be made that a strong U.S. agriculture industry is vital to the health, safety and prosperity of this country? Does this industry not demand an ample supply of leaders and workers who are prepared with the knowledge and skills to power this critical sector? Can there be agreement that agricultural science education has the potential to be the high-octane fuel for agriculture? This author strongly believes the answer to all three questions is yes. The question remaining to be asked and answered is this: Is agricultural education prepared to take the necessary steps to be the recognized "high-octane fuel" for agriculture, this country and even the world?

Strategic Plan for Agricultural Education

The next section details the conditions that must be present as well as a series of suggested strategic themes and initiatives that could allow agricultural education to make significant progress in realizing its quality and growth goals.

Key Strategic Priority Areas for Agricultural Education

To achieve the long-range goal and to accomplish its mission, it is suggested that agricultural education should be guided by key strategic priority areas (KSPAs). Sometimes termed critical success factors, the KSPAs help focus attention on conditions that must exist for professions, organizations or whole industries to reach their goals. They act as reference points for making major decisions, defining strategic projects, allocating resources and setting measurable goals.

1. The success of agricultural education on the local, state and national levels depends directly upon the collective success of the overall program of agricultural education. Accordingly, partners in Team Ag Ed together with all key stakeholders will work together to set goals, define strategies, coordinate resources and support the delivery of programs and initiatives.
2. Agricultural education programs will be administered by qualified teachers who deliver the integrated model of agricultural education. Each program will incorporate classroom/laboratory instruction, supervised experiential learning and activities that develop career, leadership and personal skills.
3. All agricultural education programs will provide the scientific, academic, technical and career skills needed by students interested in pursuing high-demand careers in the agriculture, food and natural resources industries. Students will be well prepared for continued post-secondary education and training.
4. Supervised experiential learning will be a critical component of every integrated agricultural education program, promoting technical and personal skill development and high academic achievement. Opportunities for production, entrepreneurship, research and volunteer experiences will be available to students.
5. Leadership, career success and personal growth programs of (FFA, PAS, Collegiate FFA, AFA, etc.) will be delivered to all students and directly support the overall goals of the agricultural education program. They will not be delivered separately from the integrated model of agricultural education.

A number of critical resources and capacities are needed to fully enable the integrated agricultural education model at all levels:

6. Agricultural education requires a well-funded, world-class delivery system with an abundant supply of agricultural educators, state and national leaders, teacher educators and student organization staff.

7. Agricultural education requires a strong and energized base of community, industry and advocacy supporters for its programs and activities at all levels.
8. Agricultural education programs, students and educators will reflect the diversity of their communities and the diversity of agriculture. Attracting, serving and retaining historically underrepresented populations will be an important growth strategy for all of agricultural education.
9. Agricultural education programs will be based upon valid research of stakeholder objectives, educational methods and program results. All programs will be subject to periodic peer and stakeholder review to surface recommendations for improvement.

Strategic Themes and Potential Initiatives

From the nine Key Strategic Priority Areas, a set of Strategic Themes and a draft list of initiatives have been outlined. These thoughts are offered as a catalyst for discussion and may provide a possible structure for establishing the profession's strategy for realizing its goals.

Strategic Theme: Program Quality - Implement processes to define standards, measure outcomes and improve the quality of program, teacher and student processes and results.

Possible Initiatives:

1. Define local program standards.
2. Set National Curriculum Standards for academic, technical, career and life skills.
3. Acquire assessment software to evaluate progress on national curriculum standards.
4. Create a program standards evaluation guide.
5. Develop a program evaluation and reporting database system and process.
6. Develop new teacher reward, recognition and incentive programs based on meeting standards.

Strategic Theme: Program Integration – Ensure that classroom/laboratory, SAE and FFA components of the integrated model of agricultural education can be meaningfully employed by teachers in an efficient and effective manner, so that measured results provide career growth through certification and/or articulation programs.

Possible Initiatives:

1. Adopt industry-based standards and certification programs, testing and recognition.
2. Adapt CDEs and Proficiency Awards to serve as certification instruments.
3. Outline, illustrate, teach and support universal adoption of SAE as a required component.
4. Collect and integrate all teaching support tools within a single software system.
5. Invest in LifeKnowledge and the Leadership Continuum through development of a leadership certification program.

Strategic Theme: Program Growth – Increase the number of quality agriscience/agricultural education programs by adapting the integrated model of agricultural education to meet the needs of a more diverse set of students, interests and communities.

Possible Initiatives:

1. Develop multiple agriscience education models to meet various needs.
2. Complete a diversity assessment program to identify and prioritize areas of opportunity.
3. Identify core resources and strengths of agricultural education related organizations (AERO), which can then be leveraged for growth.
4. Link agricultural education curriculum standards to national academic standards.
5. Define programs to attract and retain minority teachers, state and national leaders as well as teacher educators.

Strategic Theme: Program Accountability – Compile verified evidence of the academic, technical, career and life skills results of students in agricultural education programs and compare these results against baseline measures, progress standards and peer groups. Communicate these results to interested stakeholders for evaluation of program effectiveness.

Possible Initiatives:

1. Define stakeholder required measures and comparisons of student and program results.
2. Develop a recurring and ad hoc measurement, data collection and research strategy.
3. Create and implement testing tools, software and evaluation process.
4. Complete baseline assessment, research and recommendations program.
5. Collect annual data to provide feedback to programs and adjust testing and research.

Strategic Theme: Professional Development – Attract, develop, retain and motivate an abundant supply of highly qualified agriculture educators.

Possible Initiatives:

1. Ensure that all teachers have access to an annual high-quality 40-hour professional development program.
2. Develop and execute agricultural education teacher recruitment plans in grades 9-14.
3. Realize the development of ag-ed summer teaching workshops at all pre-service institutions.
4. Create a pipeline of interns, mentors and protégés for all levels of the agricultural education profession.
5. Develop a guide and a training academy to develop the next generation of state staff, teacher educators, program managers and national leaders.
6. Invest resources to create and catalyze volunteer programs to support every program at every level.

7. Enhance the continued development of a highly meaningful teacher recognition program.

Strategic Theme: Support Resources – Attract, apply and reward the financial and staff resources necessary to operate the local, state and national systems of agricultural education.

Possible Initiatives:

1. Create case statement, annual report and proposal guide ensuring that all AEROs are “funding ready.”
2. Develop non dues funding streams to support state and national staff leadership.
3. Create a training and experience track to prepare teachers for state and national staff roles.
4. Strengthen relationships with government agencies and agricultural industry associations.
5. Explore new and additional streams of governmental funding.
6. Develop attractive roles for early retirees on state and national staffs.
7. Pursue major licensing and named sponsorship opportunities.
8. Develop individual giving streams to equal corporate funding.
9. Develop a corporate marketing opportunities strategy to complement a charitable giving strategy.

Strategic Theme: Team Ag Ed – Develop, operate and support a set of organizations that collectively provide the necessary functions of agricultural education at the local, state and national levels. Create plans, measurements incentives, programs and agreements that ensure highest-quality objectives are routinely achieved cooperatively.

Possible Initiatives:

1. Conduct annual Team Ag Ed planning and reporting meeting.
2. Coordination of regional and national meetings where all AEROs would meet at the same time and location while maintaining the identity of each group.
3. Create and operate program reporting system used to document program value.
4. Survey agricultural education stakeholders to gauge program satisfaction, governance, legitimacy and wants.
5. Create shared annual report to emphasize progress, cooperation and interdependency.
6. Complete branding studies regarding agriscience, FFA, Project Lead the Way and other leading-edge terminology.

Overall Guiding Strategy

As the profession moves to determine the most critical priorities for achieving program growth and quality, an overriding guiding strategy for consideration could be to “Establish and support agricultural education as an ideal career for talented individuals wanting to make a positive difference for others.”

Potential First Steps

Recognizing that the entire profession must work together to achieve growth and quality goals for agricultural education, the profession's coordinating body must play the pivotal role. It is being suggested that the National Council for Agricultural Education establish a "Strategic Plan Management Committee" to facilitate and coordinate all aspects of the long-range goal. This committee should be composed of representatives from all AEROs and agricultural education stakeholders. These individuals should be prepared to contribute significant time and resources in identification, assignment and monitoring of the most critical initiatives.

The author would also offer that the profession would be well served if The Council would employ an individual or firm to manage all aspects of the growth and quality strategic plan, including planning, resource development, communications and execution.

Final Observations

Agricultural education's great long-term success has been built upon the strength of its teachers who produce tremendous results with students of all levels of talent and skill. They do all of this in communities with average or modest resources. This success results from the commitment, drive, skills and abilities of those teachers. In many ways, the future of this country's agricultural industry depends upon teachers, teacher educators, state staff and other agricultural education leaders choosing to direct their energies to create that same level of "overarching" success at the university, state and national levels.

We are at a crossroads in the evolution of agricultural education. When historians consider the social and economic environment of this time, they will no doubt evaluate the steps the profession chose to take (or failed to take) in meeting the pressing educational and societal needs of our country and the world. Let's not lose this opportunity to respond now in a way that makes a real difference, both for today and tomorrow.

The bright future we desire requires agricultural education to act as one in fully embracing, endorsing and promoting the comprehensive agricultural education model. We must be willing to enforce rigor and relevance in every classroom while at the same time reaching out to every student from every background and at every skill level.

The phrase "Think globally, act locally" applies to our situation today. We need the National Council for Agricultural Education to empower a group of agriculture educators to do the heavy lifting of setting the goals, identifying the strategies and engaging professional staff and volunteers at all levels from local classrooms through state and national organizations. These educators must hold accountable all parts of the profession for unlocking the value inherent in the agricultural education model. While many may have concern about the political climate and the education debate taking place in Washington and in our state capitals. The author is suggesting that this time of educational debate is a wonderful opportunity, perhaps our best opportunity, to recast agricultural education as the true servant-leader for agriculture and this country.

Is it now time to put shoe leather and elbow grease to the beliefs that were first envisioned by those who conceived the importance of formalized instruction in what we would now call the business, science and technology of agriculture? The genius of the agricultural education model has the potential to serve students, their communities, this country and the world.

Doug Loudenslager
Chief Operating Officer
National FFA Organization and Foundation (dloudenslager@ffa.org)