

Agricultural Sciences Outreach Program

A Senior Project

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California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

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by

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# **Agricultural Sciences Outreach Program**

## **Introduction**

The College of Agriculture, Food, and Environmental Sciences (CAFES) mission statement and vision of the Agricultural Education and Communication Department is to develop future leaders, educators, and communicators to advance and advocate for the agricultural industry in a global economy (AGED, 2018). Student organizations, such as Agriculture Ambassadors and Agriculture Leadership Society, facilitate several outreach events to engage and excite prospective students in pursuing their higher education goals in agriculture at Cal Poly (CAFES Ag Council, 2018). In order to maintain growing student numbers, the Agricultural Education and Communication Department, specifically, the Agricultural Science major needs revamped recruiting efforts and to discover new, innovative methods of attracting the next generation of Mustangs. By increasing Cal Poly's outreach to youth agricultural programs, the Agricultural Education and Communications Department could supply prospective students with more information and better display the opportunities available through the Agricultural Science major. This project will provide the AGED Department with ideas, methods and events to recruit students to apply and accept admission to the Agricultural Science major.

## **Background**

The agriculture industry is experiencing a shortage of qualified graduates at a time that coincides with low enrollment in higher education of agricultural based fields (Donnermeyer, 1994). In 2016, 123 students enrolled in Cal Poly's Animal Science major; however, the Agricultural Sciences major only received 20 enrollments into their program (Cal Poly, 2018). Unlike Animal Science, Agricultural Science focuses on preparing the next generation of agricultural educators and industry leaders. Decreased enrollment has motivated universities to research new methods of attracting applicants (Hanover Research, 2014).

There are several factors that commonly influence a student's decision on both major and college choice, these include parental influences, specific interests, recruitment efforts, and career opportunities (Esters, 2004). In an effort to encourage new applicants for agricultural programs, campuses have begun individually reaching out to students. Informational publications, utilization of feeder schools, and consistent contact with high school Future Farmers of America (FFA) programs have been identified as being successful methods of recruitment. Lastly, ensuring the bond of a personal connection between students and faculty has proved successful in increasing application (Myers, 2003).

## **Program Phases**

The team set out to plan recruitment events that would engage with high school students in order to encourage them to apply for the Agricultural Science (AGSC), Agricultural Communication (AGC), and Dairy Science (DSCI) majors at Cal Poly. The authors initiated the first phase of their project by approaching the Dairy Science prospective student recruitment coordinators, Rich Silacci and David Vagnoni. The authors presented the idea and expressed the students' interest in partnering with the coordinators' current recruitment efforts. Once the DSCI recruitment coordinators approved the joint efforts, the students scheduled several meetings to determine which high schools and local college nights to attend for their student recruitment outreaches.

The second phase included designing informational documents and a presentation geared to influence prospective students to apply for the Agricultural Communications, Agricultural Sciences, and Dairy Science programs offered at Cal Poly. They created handouts that depicted the countless job opportunities the students could pursue following graduation. The team focused the agenda of their presentation on each of the three emphasized agricultural majors (AGC, AGSC, DSCI) offered by Cal Poly. The authors initially intended to visit high schools and their agriculture programs directly to recruit students. With hopes to expand their outreach, the students and their advisors put forth the plan to hold two large recruitment events instead. The students strategically chose locations for each event to maximize the amount of agriculture programs that could attend. The advisors directed the students to hold the first event for California's North Valley schools in Hilmar, California and the second event to be held in Tulare, California for California's South Valley schools.

The third phase began by confirming dates and event centers for each of the outreach events scheduled. The authors then mailed hard copy invitations to the agriculture departments of each high school. Prior to each event the authors contacted the CAFES Special Events Coordinator, Donna Packard, for supplemental promotional items, displays, and CAFES informational documents (info sheets and magazines). Fellow Cal Poly students and recent alumni were asked to attend each event as representatives of the highlighted majors.

The final goal of the outreach events was to inform high school students of the experiences and career opportunities the major programs offer. The event also set out to educate prospective students of the complex admissions criteria at Cal Poly and ways in which they can be competitive in the process.

## Results

Prior to the event starting, attendees were greeted at the check-in table; here the team collected information about each student to determine what schools and age groups attended the event. All attendees were given informational and promotional items that represented all three programs. These items included Cal Poly stickers, buttons, pens, and pennants. They were also supplied with magazines, career pathway information, and each program's fact sheets. During this transition period, current students from each program, advisors, and major events were highlighted in a slideshow displayed at the front of the room.

Each event began with a brief explanation of the event's agenda and the team's purpose for the project. The team moved forward to introduce their advisors, David Vagnoni and Rich Silacci, who would elaborate on Cal Poly's Dairy Science program. The advisors wrapped up their presentation with a video showcasing the campus' Dairy Unit, testimonials from current students, and unique ways to get involved with the Dairy program at Cal Poly. Next, the team leaders, Maghan England and Sophie Johnston, outlined the aspects of the Agricultural Science and Communications program and displayed a video introducing the departmental opportunities and faculty. Both presentations included information regarding clubs, internships, leadership teams, and other significant aspects highlighting the unique Cal Poly experience. Following the information on major specific opportunities, Dr. David Vagnoni discussed the extensive Cal Poly admissions process. Attendees were each provided a handout that described what is desired of a Cal Poly applicant. This section of the presentation produced many questions which transitioned the team into the Questions & Answer portion of the event.

The event in Hilmar, California was attended by 40 students, family members, and advisors. This event had attendees from several programs in the area; including Gustine and Hilmar High Schools. Prospective students ranged from 9th to 12th grade and also included undergraduates from the Modesto Jr. College. After the conclusion of the presentation, the hosts allowed time for questions. Audience members mostly focused their questions on information regarding transferring into Cal Poly from their local community colleges. Parents also sought guidance and direction to ensure their students would meet the qualifications of Cal Poly's admissions process. Many students at this event showed explicit interest in the Dairy Science program with some students looking for more information regarding the Agricultural Science program. Students said they were drawn to the the AGSC program because of its course flexibility, individualized or teaching pathways, and ability to work well including minors into the students coursework.

The event in Tulare, California was attended by eight students and parents which resulted in a conversational presentation style. The Tulare students were approaching graduation and had a driven interest in attending Cal Poly. With a smaller crowd, the team was able to individually meet with each family and address their concerns one on one. Due to the students being in their final years of highschool, they were worried they would not meet Cal Poly's desired course load

prior to graduation. Parents that attended the event were interested in steps on how to make their student competitive in the admissions process at Cal Poly.

## **Discussion**

The team plans to continue the outreach events next year after making necessary changes to the invitation process and revising the presentation. The team suggests to research current events held at Cal Poly geared towards student recruitment and later use this information to support the presentation and offer attendees a schedule of events the prospective students should attend for further information.

The team recommends in-person invitations for future outreach events; as opposed to the mailed packages. By focusing solely on the agriculture teachers at target schools, the team will be able to explain the purpose of the outreach events and how attending will benefit their students. In-person invitations will also open a line of communication between teachers and the outreach event team prior to the event. The team also proposes utilizing social media platforms to better advertise. The use of engaging, inviting posts would excite students to attend the outreach events. By gaining a connection with each program's advisors, the team could request for the school's to share posts with their program's network sites. The team understands the importance of informing parents of future recruitment events, and believes this could best be accomplished through Facebook and Instagram posts.

To check the authors' success, all attendees of the outreach events should be provided with a survey link for questions pre and post presentations. Survey data can be collected after each college night the team attended, with scoring for: (1) student's initial interest in Cal Poly, (2) student's interest in jobs related to the Agricultural Communication, Agricultural Science, and Dairy Science majors, and (3) student's interests after the conclusion of the informational presentation.

It is advised to continue focusing efforts for outreach in these specified areas; as there is a high interest from the community in the dairy industry and agriculture as a whole. Moving forward with this project, the team hopes to add at least two more locations to the itinerary. By increasing locations, the team can reach more students and better promote the programs. Overall, the team believed the outreach events to be successful and, with minor alterations, encourage this project to be repeated for future recruitment efforts.

## References

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