Teaching Farm Management by Challenging Students to Manage

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Introduction: Iowa State University and the Department of Agricultural Education and Studies (AgEds) provide a unique teaching and learning opportunity for senior level students. The Ag450 farm and the AgEds 450 course were developed to provide students the opportunity to manage and operate a typical farming operation as part of a capstone course in AgEds. This type of teaching and learning provides students the opportunity to become involved in all facets of the farm as a means of learning about management and operations. Problem-solving and decision-making skills are the primary focus of the curriculum as students become involved in several committee projects. The curriculum includes on-farm lecture/discussions, on-farm laboratory, business meetings, experiential learning and strategic issues. Oral and written class reports and discussions are used to understand the various information and situations. The Ag450 farm hosts several international visitors each year that want to understand more about this type of learning situation and what a typical Iowa farm is like. They can identify the benefits but also explain a variety of factors that may limit the development and success of this teaching situation in their teaching and educational environment.

Method: Using information provided by staff involved with the teaching and operations of the Ag450 farm we will discuss the methods for developing this type of curriculum. The staff will discuss the methods involved with providing the students with the information and responsibility necessary to allow for a student managed operation to function effectively and efficiently. Student’s perceptions and feedback related to this type of learning situation will also be utilized.

Major points of information to be shared:
1. The Ag450 farm concept and the teaching and learning processes
2. The student’s perceptions of how this type of learning situation is beneficial
3. How this Ag450 farm concept can be introduced into a variety of international farm management settings.
4. The factors that benefit and limit the idea of student managed farming operations internationally.

Conclusions or lessons learned: Through several research studies, departmental reviews, and outreach programs the AgEds department has identified the importance of the Ag450 farm and course on student learning. Although a majority of the students and people visiting the Ag450 farm can identify and understand the benefits associated with this type of learning situation, the acceptance and development of similar programs has been limited. A discussion of these limiting factors and the Ag450 concepts may lead to future possibilities to partner with other farm management teaching institutions worldwide.

Educational importance: The students taking the AgEds 450 course at Iowa State University have discussed and reported an improved ability to apply what they learn about farm management as a result of their experiences in this type of learning environment. The idea of allowing students to become more involved in the management and decision-making processes could have a significant impact on the ability of students to apply their experiences to any farming situation.