

Improving Arkansas' 4-H State O-Rama Agricultural Communications Events

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Introduction

For nearly 100 years, youth have been participating in 4-H competitive events. 4-H'ers value competition as a means of learning responsibility, building self-confidence and self-worth, and preparing them to face challenges in a competitive world (Radhakrishna, 2006). Several researchers agree that one of 4-H's most important goals is to teach youth through competitive activities (Keith & Vaughn, 1998; & Weber & McCullers, 1986).

The need for an agricultural communications competition is three-fold. First, agricultural communications is an emerging discipline, and youth need to be made aware of the career opportunities available within the industry. Second, state competitions facilitate recruiting opportunities for university faculty and undergraduate students to interact with prospective students. Lastly, participants are given the chance to apply advanced communications skills in practical exercises.

Although two agricultural communications competitions exist at the state level in Arkansas, communications professionals and faculty agree the contests lack rigor and relevance. The objectives of the proposed changes to the existing 4-H State O-Rama competitions include 1) encouraging youth to prepare before the day of the competition, 2) better meeting the career objectives of 4-H competitions, and 3) involving more 4-H youth through developing additional competitions related to agricultural communications.

How it Works

Improvements would be made to the two existing competitions to meet the first two objectives of this project. The photography competition currently consists of participants taking a roll of photos at least 10 days prior to the 4-H State O-Rama competition. The Extension Communications Department then develops the film and selects the top five photos. The activity also includes a discussion of camera basics and photography techniques.

The original components of this competition would be replaced with a more regulated, skills-based competition. Upon arriving to the contest, the participants would critique and rank a set of photos from best to worst based on basic photo composition rules. In addition, participants would be required to write a cutline for a photo using proper grammar, punctuation, and cutline-writing style. Awards would be given to the top five participants.

A photography curriculum and instructor's guide would be developed to effectively train parents, 4-H volunteer leaders, and extension agents to teach the basics of judging photography and writing cutlines.

The 4-H Reporting competition currently consists of competitors participating in a workshop that covers basic news writing skills. Participants are not required to prepare prior to the contest. The second part of the competition involves participants writing a one or two-page news story with information obtained at a mock news conference in which the instructor introduces an idea or project and participants ask questions.

While the basic structure of this activity is well-organized, it lacks the need for prior preparation and the applicable knowledge of basic communications skills. To improve the current competition, a study curriculum (and instructor's guide) would be developed for students to learn communications skills prior to arriving to the contest. An annual workshop for interested youth would be conducted during the spring prior to the 4-H State O-Rama. The workshop would include intense sessions on Associated Press style, interview techniques, inverted pyramid writing, newsworthiness of stories, and formatting news releases. Participants would be supplied with materials to study until the actual contest in July. In addition, instructional communications workshops for volunteer leaders and parents would be offered during the semiannual 4-H Adult Leaders Association Forums.

Upon arriving to the contest, participants would receive a brief review of the skills addressed in available curriculum and would be allowed to ask the instructor questions about communications skills before the competition begins. The actual contest would consist of a news conference in which participants would take notes and question the speaker. Afterwards, participants would have 90 minutes to write a two-page news release about the topic discussed in the news conference. Awards would be given to the top five participants.

Implications

State 4-H leaders and volunteers are receptive to the idea of improving the agricultural communications contests at the 4-H State O-Rama. Most volunteer leaders and extension agents realize the important role communications skills play in the future of agriculture.

Because the Arkansas 4-H program will celebrate its centennial anniversary in 2008 and subsequently will receive an increase in media attention, introducing an improved agricultural communications competition could be highly publicized and could serve as an excellent example of the progressive improvements in Arkansas 4-H competitive events.

Future plans

Since one of the objectives is to increase youth participation, a web design contest and a team competition incorporating several agricultural communications-related skills would eventually be implemented. The creation of new competitions would provide more outlets for students who are interested in communications and would incorporate the use of new technology in the communications industry.

Costs/Resources Needed

Organizers would seek extramural funds to develop curriculum and provide training to participants, 4-H volunteer leaders, and parents. Ultimately, the goal would be to encourage an agricultural organization or publication to sponsor the agricultural communications events at the 4-H State O-Rama. Until this goal was met, supplemental support would come from the Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service.

References

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