

Is SAE Meeting the Needs of Today's Students?

By Kevin A. Keith

Is SAE meeting the needs of today's students? The answer to this often asked question, from my observation is, yes! And no. I know that you are already thinking that this article will not answer the question that I have heard asked since I entered agricultural education as a major in 1974.

Allow me to further explain... Over the past five years, while serving the National FFA Organization as Teacher Services Specialist for SAE-Based Activities, I have had the opportunity to travel to more than 30 states to meet with agricultural education teachers and students. I have been lucky to have spent time in many agricultural education departments while in these states and I have tried to listen carefully to discussions, questions, and challenges about Supervised Agricultural Experience programs. I hear teachers tell me that there is little or no opportunity for their students to become involved in SAE and that they feel that SAE has long outlived its usefulness. I also hear teachers tell me that the SAE program is the most vital experience provided in their program and that it is what keeps them fresh and enthusiastic about their future in agricultural education. Additionally, I hear that SAE is what separates us from other disciplines - and this is used conversely as an argument both for and against offering SAE.

What is the difference, as far as SAE commitment and philosophy, between the following two actual examples I encountered over the past couple of years? Teacher A is a small rural school agricultural education instructor who expressed to me that the reason he could not conduct SAE

programs for more than a very few of his students was that there are precious few opportunities for SAE's for his students like those that would be available in a large urban or suburban area. Teacher B is an agricultural education instructor teaching in a city of about 120,000, who said that the reason he had abandoned SAE is that it is set up only for the students in small rural communities and did not consider the lack of opportunity found in the urban situation. I believe that the answer to the question is simple — there is little or no difference between the sentiment toward SAE for Teacher A and Teacher B. They both believe that the value of the SAE has expired, that it is not for everyone and is in fact, not an intra-curricular part of the Agricultural Education program.

Now what about the two other teachers, again with very real situations, I encountered over the same time frame? Teacher C is an agricultural education instructor in one of our nations largest urban centers. He tells of the fact that the program he and his colleagues conduct relies heavily on the experiences offered to each

and every one of their several hundred students. Even given the number of students, he feels badly that at times he cannot match up all the SAE experiential opportunities with the students, because there are simply far too many opportunities available for the number of students. Teacher D teaches in a rural community of about 800 residents in an area where production agriculture still is the primary use of the bulk of the land, although most of the farms and ranches are much larger. Not many of his students come off the farm. This instructor not only has all of his students involved in SAE, he has seen several of them recognized in the highest venues as national finalists in proficiency awards and even in the Stars Over America program. He indicates that placement of additional students would be easy based upon the opportunity in his community.

Here again, I believe that there is little to no difference between the sentiments toward SAE for Teacher C and Teacher D. These teachers see the value. They view it as an essential aspect of the agricultural education program, vital to the development of



SAE must function as an intra-curricular part of the Agricultural Education program. (Photo courtesy of Iowa State University College of Agriculture.)

each and every student in their program.

Now, let's look at the differences between the two pairs of examples. It would seem that there are certainly some major differences in philosophy. Teachers A and B seem to have abandoned the agricultural education program philosophy of three interconnected circles of classroom/laboratory instruction, SAE and FFA (figure 1). Often I have heard groups of beginning instructors talk about going into their jobs and working only on the instructional program and then, at some later date improving the FFA program and "maybe someday even establishing the SAE program". It seems as though some new and even many current instructors, view the program as three parts that can be developed when convenient. In fact, while serving as a state supervisor, I received calls from teachers who wanted me to defend their extended summer contracts under the premise that these contracts were essential to SAE, after they had told me that they had abandoned the SAE as a part of the program in their schools. Do Teachers A and B feel that SAE is intra-curricular? Do they feel that SAE has kept pace with today's students? Do they see such experiences as vital to the development of

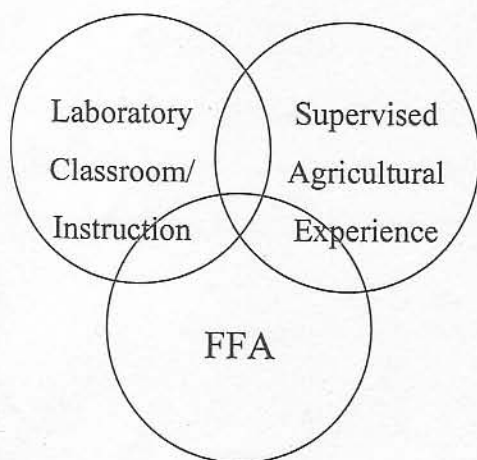


Figure 1. The Agricultural Education Philosophy, consisting of three interconnected circles.

students? Apparently not! What about Teachers C and D? Ask the same questions about them and I think that the answer is a resounding, YES! Does the answer to the basic questions posed in this issue of *The Agricultural Education Magazine* lie in things like personal commitment and personal views toward agricultural education philosophy or does it lie in an inability to view SAE in a broad and liberal or creative fashion? Does the plethora of available materials supporting SAE need revision? Yes, but I believe that there is a great deal of current information available today that is on the cutting edge.

In conclusion, I believe that SAE is meeting the needs of today's students. How well it meets these needs depends totally and completely on the local instructor and the support mechanisms that have been cultivated and developed. The instructor's philosophy and personal commitment to this phase of the agricultural education program sets the basis for success in meeting the needs of the student and the community. Basically, it can be said that, those who want to have a vital supervised experience for each of their students, will have such experiences available and will implement them. Additionally, those who believe in and internalize the philosophy of SAE will find it an up-to-date and vital program and they will be enthusiastic about the future of this unique aspect of the agricultural education program.



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What SAE materials are available to teachers?

In 1992, the National Council for Agricultural Education developed a handbook entitled, "*SAE, Experiencing Agriculture*". It still contains valuable materials and information.

The *Local Program Success (LPS) guide* was printed and disseminated in 1997. It contains a chapter on SAE and included a number of documents used for coordinating outstanding SAE programs.

There are two commonly used *SAE videos* available. One was developed in 1994 and the second in 1999. Revisions to these are dependent on need and availability of funding, but both are in wide use and address many of today's challenges.

"*SAE Best Practices*" is a collection of unique, innovative and model SAE programs identified from applications received for the American FFA Degree and the proficiency awards. This guide is available on the Chapter Resource Guide CD-ROM.

The *SAE toolbox* is a website hosted by North Carolina State University. This site contains many resources for teachers, example SAE programs for students and even complete university courses on SAE. The URL for this site is: <http://www.cals.ncsu.edu/agexed/sae/toolbox/index.html>.

(Teaching materials list compiled by Kevin A. Keith)