

Enhancing Interpersonal Skills to Better Prepare Students for Diverse Careers in the Dairy Industry

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Summary

In today's increasing globalized society, graduates from agricultural programs must be prepared to navigate a diverse workforce. However, Americans, including our undergraduate students, are becoming increasingly disconnected from agriculture, particularly food animal production. This has created challenges in attracting students to agricultural careers and equipping them with essential skills like communication, teamwork, and leadership. Employers seek graduates with global perspectives, but undergraduate programs often emphasize technical knowledge over essential workplace competencies. To address these challenges, universities and industries must collaborate to better prepare graduates with both the technical knowledge and the competencies to navigate the evolving agricultural workforce.

Introduction

As the global population continues to expand, United States citizens are becoming farther removed from agriculture and have less of an understanding of where their food comes from. A similar trend is reflected in undergraduate students (APLU, 2009). Although all areas of agriculture are impacted, an increasing number of animal science undergraduate students have little to no experience with food animal production (Buchanan, 2008). This presents

a challenge to not only create interest among undergraduate students to pursue available careers but be prepared to successfully navigate diverse workplaces. Graduating students must be prepared to effectively communicate and function in a diverse workforce that will challenge them to engage with people different from themselves. In an increasingly globalized world, agriculture has been placed at the center of challenges in globalization, including diversity and the development of essential, or soft, skills.

A recent report suggested that there will be 59,400 annual job opportunities for new college graduates with expertise in food, agriculture, renewable natural resources, and the environment (**FARNRE**). However, the number of jobs will exceed those with expertise in FARNRE, and approximately 40% will be filled with graduates in allied disciplines (Fernandez et al., 2020). This taken together further illustrates the need to excite undergraduate students and prepare them for success in the agricultural industries.

Career Readiness and Skill Gaps

As globalization increases, agricultural industries now need graduates with skills such as communication, teamwork, the ability to work across cultures, and other skills that recently were seen as less important for success in

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agricultural careers (Goecker et al., 2015). Both a 2011 study (Crawford et al., 2011) and a 2020 study (Crawford and Fink) examined a critical job skills report, highlighting that graduates lack proficiency in several key skill areas necessary for success in a diverse workplace. Previous research focused on the agriculture industry has reinforced this assertion, emphasizing that agricultural graduates require specific essential skills to perform effectively in the workforce (Morgan and Rucker, 2013; Easterly et al., 2017). These essential skills include communication, problem solving, self-management, teamwork, professionalism, leadership, and experiences (Crawford et al., 2011).

In January 2020 and 2025, our research team invited members of the poultry industry to a one-hour focus group held during the International Production and Processing Expo in Atlanta, GA. A total of 19 industry leaders participated, representing one poultry association and seven companies. The objective of this session was to better understand the industry's views on what competencies will be required by future employees. Participants identified intercultural competence, written and oral communication skills, the ability to work with different clients and team members, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and management skills as key areas that need to be further developed by graduates. Our findings are consistent with those reported by Crawford and colleagues (2011).

Moving forward, animal science students must be able to demonstrate the skills to navigate global settings, even if they stay in a domestic based job throughout their career. Employers recognize this and are specifically recruiting candidates with diverse experiences and perspectives to build a more globally minded workplace (Agcareers.com, 2018). Therefore, college graduates need to possess skills to thrive

in this type of environment. Despite emphasis of essential skill development by employers, undergraduate agricultural programs have often focused on technical skill development (Morgan, 2012). This creates a gap of skills needed for graduates to be successful in the agricultural industries.

Industry Perspective on Skill Development

This skill gap in new hires can lead to employee lack of engagement, increased turnover, and employee burnout (Karcher et al., 2025). Effective onboarding is one opportunity to prepare recent graduates for success. However, this only works if the person or team leading the process has the leadership skills to motivate and prepare the new hires. Baker (2019) reported that managers spend just 9% of their time coaching and developing their direct reports and that 45% of managers lack confidence to prepare employees with the needed skills for success. Leaders within organizations should consider the importance of effective onboarding. Companies with specific and clear onboarding plans can improve employee retention by 82% (Baker, 2019).

According to Chiaburu and Marinova (2005), effective managerial training directly influences employees' ability to integrate into the company culture and perform effectively. Managers should be equipped with skills in communication, coaching, and feedback to guide new hires through their initial learning process (Govarts et al., 2011). Including essential skills, like communication, emotional intelligence, and adaptability in managerial training can assist managers in building rapport with new employees, foster supportive learning environments, and address challenges. Furthermore, structured training programs for managers, including mentorship techniques and hands-on learning, contribute to high

retention rates and job satisfaction among new employees (Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick, 2006). Organizations that invest in managerial training create a more competent and confident workforce, leading to increased performance and increased employee retention.

Conclusion

Looking ahead, universities and industry will need to continue to discuss the essential skill needs of graduating students to determine how to collaborate to prepare graduates to be successful in the workplace. Emphasis on the need for essential skills, like teamwork, leadership, and communication, will be important as new hirers seek to be successful in a global world.

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