

# Thirty Years of Student-Run Agricultural Machinery Shows at Western Illinois University An Assessment



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## Abstract

On April 3, 1970 the first "Agricultural Progress Show" was held at Western Illinois University (WIU). This event started an annual display of the newest agricultural machinery and technology in the region. Through this activity, club members and other agriculture students have had the opportunity to organize and conduct what has become the largest, totally student-run, agricultural machinery show in the nation, with over 200 exhibitors, 10,000 attendees and a budget in excess of \$25,000. To evaluate the educational benefits of this huge undertaking, a questionnaire was sent to 317 WIU Agricultural Mechanization Club members who graduated between 1970 and 2000.

Seventy six percent of those surveyed felt that their involvement in organizing and conducting the Agricultural Mechanization Show had a beneficial or great influence on their skill development in the five areas surveyed. Teamwork skill development was rated as having a beneficial or great impact on 90% of the respondents, while public relations, organizational, and leadership skills developed were considered beneficial or of great impact to 83%, 82% and 77% respectively. Only 45% of the members felt that this activity provided a beneficial or great impact in development of their money management skills. These five skills plus ethics, patience and commitment to task were areas mentioned for future development. Survey anecdotal comments consistently described the involvement in organizing and conducting the Agricultural Mechanization Show at WIU as a positive and beneficial educational experience.

## History and Club Organization

The Agricultural Mechanization Club (Ag. Mech. Club) had its origin in 1964 as a student organization within the Agriculture Department of Western Illinois University (WIU). During the 1968-69 academic year, the Ag. Mech. Club organized and conducted a contest for WIU agriculture students whereby their skills and abilities could be demonstrated. Areas included in the written and hands-on competition were welding, tractor operation, plow adjustment, electricity, and a variety of other topics.

As the 1969-70 year got underway, the club members were looking for ways to improve the original contest. It was decided that area high schools should be invited to participate. In addition, it was proposed that an equipment show be included as part of the program. A committee was formed to begin planning for the combined events. The committee decided to put more emphasis on the equipment show, host a tractor driving contest for high school students, and forego the other areas of the preceding contest. From this beginning has evolved what is now the annual "farm show" in West Central Illinois.

Presently, club membership typically includes between thirty and forty students from all majors within the Agriculture Department. Membership-wise, it could best be described as an Agriculture Department Club rather than an Agriculture Mechanization Club. This broad base of agricultural interests within the group can be attributed to the club's primary mission of conducting an annual Agricultural Mechanization Show and the commonality of interest in agriculture that this show represents.

The club's officer structure is somewhat typical of many organizations in that there is a president, secretary, and treasurer but it is quite different in the responsibility normally associated with each of these offices. For example, the treasurer's responsibilities would be more typical of a company C.E.O. In addition to the normal financial accounting responsibilities of a treasurer, he or she does the majority of the exhibit space assignments, as well as correspondence regarding booth location and fees on that space. This person is the most critical member for the successful operation of the show. The President could be compared to a conductor orchestrating the entire event. In addition to these offices there are other positions unique to the organizational needs of conducting a major event. For example there is a 1st Vice President who organizes promotional advertising costing between \$12,000 and \$15,000. There is a 2nd Vice President in charge of show signage and equipment needed to move all exhibitors in and out of the facility. There is a Public Relations officer who handles TV, radio, and print media interviews, and a

Toy Show chairman who organizes and promotes a separate exhibit area of vendors selling scale model farm tractors and machinery.

## Introduction

The needs and demands of the 21st century are significantly different from those ten, twenty, and surely thirty years ago. In education as well, the methods of delivering and receiving instructional material have greatly changed in the past thirty years. Looking at experiential learning historically, Dewey (1938) wrote, "...the fundamental unity of the newer philosophy is found in the idea that there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education." More recently, (Katula and Threnhauser, 1999) wrote, "one of the most significant trends in higher education is the movement to an "expanded classroom." Usually referred to as "experiential education", programs such as cooperative education, internships, study abroad, and service-learning are intended to bring the concrete experience into the learning model, providing students with a way to apply classroom concepts, and complete the learning process." From these two authors it would seem that experiential education was, and still is, a successful educational tool.

With this in mind and the current emphasis in higher education on curriculum assessment, student assessment, peer reviews, etc., why not Agriculture Mechanization Show assessment? Is this simply a thirty-year old tradition that has outlived its usefulness or is it still an effective experiential learning tool?

To evaluate this question, and gain other useful information, a survey was developed. Part of the survey was used to determine if the Ag. Mech. Show was, and still is, successful in providing an avenue for experiential learning. Part of the survey was also used to determine, from past show events, what was successful, as well as provide an opportunity for anecdotal comments.

## Methods and Material

After consultation with the WIU Alumni Relations Office, a general, non-validated survey form was developed (Table 1) that addressed: (1) career benefits of past farm show involvement, (2) recollections of the most and least successful activities of past shows, (3) what life or employment skills should involvement in this activity be trying to develop for the future, (4) club member demographics, (5) current occupation, and (6) anecdotal comments. The survey and a cover letter were sent to 317 club members that graduated between 1970 and 2000. Forty one percent (129) responded. Of this group 47% (61) had held an office in the club.

The first survey question asked members to rate if their involvement in the Ag. Mech. Show had no impact, little impact, beneficial impact, or a great impact upon their development of five career skills. Those skills were: leadership, organization, teamwork, money management, and public relations. Other questions included:

1. What aspects of helping with the show have you used after graduation?
2. What life or employment skills do you feel should be developed as the students prepare for and conduct future shows?
3. What did you think was the most successful activity at the show?
4. What activities were not a success?
5. What decade were you a club member?
6. Were you an officer?
7. What are you doing now?
8. Comments, questions, words of wisdom.

**Table 1. Survey Form**

| Agricultural Mechanization Show Survey  |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. How did your involvement in conducting the Ag. Mech. Show influence your development in the following list of skills? Please mark the appropriate number and elaborate. (1= no impact, 2 = little impact, 3 = beneficial impact, 4 greatly impacted) |   |   |   |   |
| Leadership skills   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Organizational skills   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Teamwork skills   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Money management skills   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Public relations skills   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Other educational benefits:   |   |   |   |   |
| 2. What, aspects of helping with the show have you used after graduating from Western Illinois University? (i.e. have you conducted a 4H program based on the things you did at the show)   |   |   |   |   |
| 3. What did you think was the most successful activity at the show? (i.e. special exhibitor, a program, outside exhibits, etc.)   |   |   |   |   |
| 4. What flopped?  |   |   |   |   |
| 5. In retrospect, what life or employment skills do you feel should be developed as the students prepare for and conduct this show?   |   |   |   |   |
| 6. What decade were you a club member: 70's __, 80's __, 90's __  |   |   |   |   |
| 7. Were you an officer? (yes __) (no __) If yes, what office? _____   |   |   |   |   |
| 8. Just for fun:  |   |   |   |   |
| What are you doing now?   |   |   |   |   |
| Comments, questions, words of wisdom? (use the back if needed)  |   |   |   |   |

The responses were separated into three groups based on the decade members graduated (i.e. 70's, 80's, or 90's). Any respondents whose club membership spanned two decades were included in the decade in which they graduated. Nineteen percent (24) of the respondents graduated in the seventies, 31% (41) graduated in the eighties, and 50% (64) graduated in the nineties. Offices were held by 26% (5) of the seventies graduates, 66% (27) of the eighties graduates, and 45% (29) of the nineties graduates.

## Results and Discussion

The responses to the first survey question are illustrated in Table 2. From this table it can be seen that, with the exception of money management skills, 77% or more of the members rated their involvement in each skill area as having a “beneficial impact” or “great impact” on their career skills development.

Teamwork skill development received the highest rating by members of all decades with 90% of the 129 responses rating it as having a beneficial or great impact. This response is logical considering that laying out booth spaces, setting up tables, moving in exhibitors, working security duty, moving out exhibitors, and restoring the facility to its original condition involves all of the club members (and many other ag students) working together to accomplish a task. Table two also shows that 77% or more of the members felt that their organizational, leadership, and public relations skills were beneficially or greatly impacted by their efforts at the Ag. Mech. Shows. In contrast, 55% of those responding felt that the Ag. Mech. Show had little or no impact on their skill development in money management. Since each year only the treasurer and a few other officers would gain

**Table 2. Impact of Agricultural Mechanization Show Involvement on Development of Career Skills, Expresses as Percentage of Responses by Decade and Survey as a Whole. (n=129)**

| Involvement Impact                               | No impact |      |      | Little impact |      |      | Beneficial impact |      |      | Great impact |      |      |
|--|-----------|------|------|---------------|------|------|-------------------|------|------|--------------|------|------|
|  | 70's      | 80's | 90's | 70's          | 80's | 90's | 70's              | 80's | 90's | 70's         | 80's | 90's |
| Leadership Skills                                | 4         | 7    | 2    | 24            | 13   | 19   | 44                | 47   | 53   | 28           | 33   | 26   |
|  | 4         |      |      | 19            |      |      | 47                |      |      | 30           |      |      |
| Organizational Skills                            | 4         | 2    | 3    | 24            | 16   | 10   | 36                | 40   | 49   | 36           | 42   | 38   |
|  | 3         |      |      | 15            |      |      | 44                |      |      | 38           |      |      |
| Teamwork Skills                                  | 8         | 2    | 2    | 4             | 4    | 10   | 44                | 40   | 32   | 44           | 54   | 56   |
|  | 3         |      |      | 7             |      |      | 37                |      |      | 53           |      |      |
| Money Management Skills                          | 16        | 20   | 20   | 48            | 30   | 34   | 32                | 32   | 32   | 4            | 18   | 14   |
|  | 20        |      |      | 35            |      |      | 32                |      |      | 13           |      |      |
| Public Relations Skills                          | 0         | 2    | 3    | 24            | 15   | 10   | 56                | 27   | 37   | 20           | 56   | 50   |
|  | 2         |      |      | 15            |      |      | 37                |      |      | 46           |      |      |
| Column Totals by Single & Combined Impact Groups | 6         |      |      | 18            |      |      | 40                |      |      | 36           |      |      |
|  | 24        |      |      |               |      |      | 76                |      |      |              |      |      |

exposure to the financial management of this event, it would be logical that other members would not rate money management as much of a benefit to them.

The responses to the question asking: “What aspect of helping with the show have you used after graduation...”, often included organizational, leadership, public relations, and teamwork skills. To a lesser extent, soliciting, hospitality, working with

customers, business contacts, and reduced shyness were mentioned. It was a rare survey that left this question blank.

Similar to the responses in the preceding question, the question asking “...What life or employment skills do you feel should be developed as students prepare for and conduct future shows”, resulted in teamwork, leadership, organizational, and public relations skills as consistently repeated answers. Other areas mentioned were: speaking, multi-tasking, goal setting, marketing, time management, ethics, patience, and commitment to a task.

Initially thought to be of less interest for this paper, but of particular interest as we plan for future shows, were the questions asking what were the most and least successful parts of past farm shows. Among the often-repeated successes were the new equipment and technologies, seminars, guest speakers, toy shows, and craft shows. Interestingly, however, another common response kept appearing. It might best be described by this member's comment: “The most successful thing was not an activity at all! It is the sense of accomplishment after the show is over and you look back and realize what you have pulled off!”

“Nothing” was the most consistent comment regarding the least successful aspect of the show. Outside exhibits during winter, a “farmer's daughter” speech contest, the year the show was cancelled because a new gym floor was installed in the exhibit building, garden tractor pull, seminars, and trying to herd people past particular exhibits were other examples of unsuccessful show activities mentioned.

The final question asking for comments, questions, and words of wisdom was probably the most enlightening as an assessment of the worth of the Ag. Mech. Show. It elicited the most emotional and “I'm really glad you asked” kind of responses. Most of the remarks related to their years at WIU and working on the show, but some were philosophical (surely acceptable, as with age comes wisdom). None indicated that the Ag. Mech. Show was an activity that had outlived its usefulness. The following responses are a representative example of those received.

- “The Ag. Mech. Club had one of the most lasting impressions of any of my activities at Western. I cannot think of any other activity that allows you to gain so much experience in so many different areas in such little time.”
- “The Ag. Mech. Show should at all cost be kept a part of WIU ... I feel that I have gained more knowledge on how to reach that goal of success regardless of how it is measured (money, toys, happy life, etc).”
- “We don't always know how it betters us, but it does.”
- “Had to set up a tent for the 2000 Farm Progress

show same as preparing for the '85 Ag. Mech. Show just easier”

- “The Mech. Show and the Livestock Judging Team were as important to my education as the course work.”
- “Probably the single best learning experience of my entire college experience”

Providing students with the skills needed to embark on a successful career is a major goal of higher education. To accomplish this, as educators we can show students the skills and explain how to effectively use those skills. We can ask the students to explain back to us how they work or form student groups to practice using those skills. But providing educational experiences where the students have to take skills from their prior learning and develop them in a real life setting is more difficult. The survey responses would suggest that the organizing and conducting of the Ag. Mech. Show has successfully provided such a learning experience.

### Summary

Of the former Ag. Mech. Club members surveyed, 76% felt that their involvement in organizing and conducting the annual Ag. Mech. Shows had a beneficial or great influence on the development of their leadership, organizational, teamwork, money

management, and public relations career skills. Teamwork skill development was given the highest rating. Leadership, public relations, and organizational skill development were also highly rated, while money management skill development was considered of little or no impact by the majority of those responding. The majority of those surveyed also emphasized that those same skills should be strongly promoted in the future.

The consensus of those surveyed felt that the Ag. Mech. Show was beneficial in that it provided an opportunity for them to develop career skills in a real life setting. It could be concluded that thirty years of student-run Ag. Mech. Shows highlight the truth “What I hear -- I learn for now. What I apply --I learn forever.”

### Literature Cited

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