

Problem: Middle and high students in Adair County and other Southwest Iowa counties were not aware of career opportunities in agriculture outside of farming. They had limited knowledge of careers or post-secondary educational options in the field of agriculture. There were few chances to develop and build their communication skills and virtually no opportunities for them to partner with adults to address their needs or interests.

Response: In 1994 a group of adults and youths from Adair, Cass and Audubon counties met to find a way address the problem and SOFA (Speak Out For Agriculture) was born. During the first four years SOFA consisted of a communications skill development day and a career day field trip. SOFA went “on the road” in 1999 becoming a jam packed 2 day career adventure trip. The trip consists of ag related tours and workshops at community colleges and universities. A planning committee of teens with guidance from Extension staff design, organize, and lead the program.

Impact: Following are comments from past SOFA participants from Adair County who are either college students or graduates on how SOFA impacted them.

Greater Understanding of Agriculture Options: Participants have visited diverse agricultural related interests from John Deere plants to Jolly Time Pop Corn. Over time students have explored careers in horticulture, animal science, agricultural engineering, public relations/marketing, agronomy, broadcasting, and food processing.

“The knowledge gained and experiences that I had the chance to partake in on the six different SOFA road trips were some of the most beneficial opportunities I had in my middle & high school career. To have the opportunity learn about and experience first hand, so many different avenues within agricultural industries has paid great dividends to me; whether it was manufacturing facilities, post secondary educational institutions or advertising agencies – they were all informative and interesting.” – Matt Rohrig, 2007 ISU Animal Science/Ag Business graduate, Outside Salesman for Hog Slat and Swine Producer – Yorkshire breeding stock and club pigs

“SOFA is a program that can take many rural kids to places they otherwise couldn’t go, and show them opportunities they never thought were possible.” – Matt Wedemeyer, DMACC Business Administration graduate, Farmer and Real Estate Agent

"SOFA provided me opportunities to tour different colleges campuses, explore careers and learn more about the ever- changing world of agriculture." – Greg Lilly, will graduate in May 2008 from ISU in Ag Business

Greater Understanding of Educational Pathways: Participants have toured college campuses including Iowa State University, Kansas State, South Dakota State, and Kirkwood Community College. As part of their college experiences they have participated in hands-on workshops within different departments, visited with admissions counselors and student ambassadors, and interacted with faculty. Students are more aware of options and the high school preparation needed.

“I was able to have more general knowledge and guidance as to what I wanted to do in the future. I feel that without all of my SOFA experiences, I may have chosen the undecided major and spent much wasted time and money figuring out what direction I wanted to pursue.” – Alyse Herr, current ISU Agriculture Engineering major

“I know that SOFA played a part in my decision to attend ISU and major in Agricultural Engineering instead of mechanical or civil as well as enhance my desire to remain in the mid west region, where agriculture is recognized as such an important industry.” - Tony Mensing, 2007 ISU agriculture engineering and Design Engineer Vermeer Corporation

Greater Planning and Organization Skills: Planning team members learn every aspect of a planning an event from establishing a budget and raising money to identifying stops and making contacts.

“Serving as a planning team member was such a unique and defining experience. Very few high schoolers have the opportunity to work on a team of leaders from multiple high schools to plan an event (or in our case, two events) for our peers. As a planning team member, you learn to brainstorm, listen to others’ ideas, consider options, and compromise to solve a “problem” (or in this case, create a solution). It was a great opportunity to work with peers who had different perspectives regarding agriculture and create a program each year that blended our ideas. I stepped out of my comfort zone to contact various businesses and commodity groups for donations, as well as contacting industry professionals to present workshops or host us during our career visits. This really gave me confidence and helped me to understand that I can affect change and that businesses are willing to help when given the opportunity. In my current position, I plan educational experiences for middle and high school students – not unlike SOFA field trips. My SOFA experience has caused me to set a high bar for these experiences. I don’t want to just “visit a college campus” but find ways to really provide an

educational experience for my students that will broaden their horizons or help them narrow their options. In 2007, I became president of our state professional organization. This was quite an undertaking for a young professional, but my SOFA & 4-H experiences provided me with confidence in my ability to work with others and positively affect change within my community. As Iowa MAEOPP president, this confidence enabled me to motivate our 100-member association to create positive changes at the federal level for TRIO programs.” – Jessica Rohrig 2002 ISU Ag Ed graduate and Iowa State University TRIO Education Talent Search Program Advisor

Creates a Pool of Loyal Alumni and Supporters: SOFA alumni believe so strongly in their experience they give back to the program. Alumni volunteer as chaperones, open doors at their own work site, lead workshops, and make cash contributions to the program.

“I am firm believer that SOFA is a good investment; otherwise I would not have donated for the last five years. SOFA is an excellent chance for young people to jump out of their comfort zone, meet fellow agriculturalists from their age group and area, and spend two the most valuable days of summer vacation exploring, experiencing and expanding their knowledge of the various avenues the agricultural world has to offer.” – Matt Rohrig

“I am willing to give my time as a SOFA chaperone because I have such fond memories of my own SOFA experience. I made lasting friendships; had the opportunity to tour several college campuses and learn about a variety of agricultural careers. This is a way for me extend the same opportunities I had to a new crop of agriculturalists.” – Dan Dreher, 2007 ISU Ag Communications and Iowa Soybean Association Producer Services Coordinator

“The experience on SOFA, as well as the experiences from being a farm kid with 4-H enabled me to be very passionate about issues that relate to farming operations and communities. I’m excited that I’m going to be able to host SOFA at the DMACC farm this summer. I loved teaching other students about agriculture when I taught agriculture education at Baxter, and I continue to enjoy presenting learning opportunities for the students at DMACC so they can share a dream to keep our agriculture sector growing and strong.” – Wade Boehm, 2005 ISU Ag Ed and DMACC Farm Manager

Everyone wins with SOFA

“Planning team members have a confidence and assurance that they are able to contribute positively to campus and community organizations. As professionals, people recognize this confidence and trust our ability to design and organize events though we are young. In my own experience, I’ve been surprised by professionals who are 10-20 years my senior and are unwilling to think for themselves, but do only what is asked of them. SOFA taught me that I am able to think critically and work cooperatively with others to do ‘big’ things...and the planning team experience gave me the confidence to understand my own power to contribute and achieve this.” – Jessica Rohrig

“Everyone benefits from the SOFA program. High school students get to meet new friends and explore new opportunities in agriculture, parents get a few days away from their kids and may get the opportunity to be a chaperone, host sites get to showcase their business and recruit future employees, and SOFA donors get satisfaction from seeing youth actively engaging in agriculture.” – Alyse Herr