

# Outside the BOX: Finding the right ones

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The dominant concern of contemporary business leaders as they engage in discussions about the future seem to center around the concept of assuring or improving “sustainability.” Yet the sustainability concept is ill-defined as its meaning ranges from

determining environmental impact to assuring economic viability, depending on the perspective of those leading the conversation. While resource utilization, ecosystem health, profitability, and a host of other factors are certainly worth consideration, an often ignored piece of

the puzzle is the process of attracting talented human beings who have had appropriate educational and work experiences.

From my perspective, the greatest challenge facing the beef sector is having access to the best and brightest. Almost regardless of which segment of the beef industry is making the hire, employers along the beef supply chain desire several fundamental characteristics in new employees:

- A well-developed work ethic accompanied by an awareness that careers are best built from the ground up.
- Evidence of industry knowledge, practical skills and work experience.
- Decision-making ability underpinned by a logical approach to making and defending choices under pressure.
- Creative problem solving built on the ability to utilize information from a variety of sources, disciplines and perspectives.
- Effective written and verbal communication skills coupled with the ability to effectively advocate for a position built on appropriate analysis of both quantitative and qualitative information.
- Integrity, honesty, discipline and honor.

## **The next generation of agriculture**

The challenge of finding the right people is compounded by the growing disconnect between the agricultural colleges and the industry that undermines the ability of students to gain skill sets and experiences that enhance their ability to be successful in the workplace. To be fair, agricultural programs in higher education are under stress from several factors — shrinking operational budgets, growing pressure for faculty to spend their energy pursuing federal research funds, and the loss of support from governing boards and senior administrators for agricultural education, Extension and research.

However, these very pressures are undermining the long-term support from agricultural supply chain employers. As economic pressures have mounted, many colleges have chosen to de-emphasize or even eliminate programs that provide foundational training of the next generation of agricultural leaders and managers such as livestock and meats judging teams, production-focused laboratories such as palpation, artificial insemination (AI), ration formulation, product fabrication and breeding animal selection, and student organizations that focus on enhancing interaction with industry.

Molly McAdams, senior brand

manager for HEB grocery stores — a major beef retailer — recently communicated that experiences such as participation in judging activities was a primary characteristic her company sought in new employees hired into management positions. She is not alone in her assessment that industry-related extracurricular participation is important in developing decision-making, communication, advocacy and problem-solving skills.

As a case in point, consider the value of the judging team experience — students learn to make decisions under time pressure while developing a logical defense of their choices; they then have to communicate their reasoning in either written or verbal form to a judge. Additionally, participants work in a team environment, commit long hours of practice and have the opportunity to visit numerous industry sites while meeting successful owners, managers and leaders of the industry. Finally, judging teams are competitive, matching their skills against those of students from a national array of educational institutions.

Granted, as livestock and product selection techniques have evolved, it is critical for judging programs to adapt and change. Judging programs should be modernized, and, frankly, too many coaches have been slow to seek opportunities to refine and strengthen the educational nature of judging programs. Critics of judging

to their involvement in nontraditional learning opportunities and extracurricular activities. Without fail, students responded that more than 50% of their educational merit was gained outside the traditional classroom setting.

If we wish to assure these opportunities for future generations, then agricultural and beef cattle leaders must engage decision makers who influence

funding for extracurricular educational experiences at both the secondary and post-secondary levels and passionately advocate for programs of value.

Furthermore, investing in FFA, 4-H and junior breed associations has never been more important. As Jerry Garcia once said, “Somebody has got to do something, and it is just incredibly pathetic that it has to be us.” Our times call for action if we

want to sustain the educational process that prepares young people to serve and lead. Our future may depend on how seriously we approach this task.



**Editor's Note:** Tom Field is a rancher from Parlin, Colo., and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) executive director of producer education.

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programs point to cases where commitment to judging far exceeded the commitment of participants to their course work. However, many institutions report that students actively engaged in extracurricular activities have higher academic performance than their less-engaged counterparts.

**Chopping block**

Yet despite the advantages, extracurricular programs that enhance interaction with industry seem to increasingly land on the chopping block. Reversing this trend is critical to assuring that young men and women have adequate opportunities to put their classroom knowledge into the context of the workplace.

During my nearly 20 years on the faculty at Colorado State University, I had the opportunity to serve on the outstanding senior selection committee. One of the standard questions posed to award candidates was to gain their insight as to what percentage of the value of their overall educational experience was attributed