

Kansas State University Feedlot Boot Camp and Teaching Program: Growing Student Interest and Engagement in the Feedlot Industry

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Abstract

From 2019 through 2023, 95 Kansas State University College of Agriculture undergraduate students participated in the annual K-State Feedlot Boot Camp and Teaching Program. The program aims to develop students' knowledge, skills, and professional relationships in feedlot management to help meet the critical need for trained professionals in the feedlot industry. Student knowledge of feedlots prior to the Boot Camp ranged from little to no experience with feedlots to being raised on beef cow-calf or feedlot operations. The program begins with a 4-day comprehensive "Boot Camp" at Western Kansas feedlots which includes on-site feedlot experiences and discussions about topics such as cattle health, feeding and nutrition, feedlot design and maintenance, and the business of cattle feeding. An evening networking dinner brings students and feedlot managers together to facilitate students gaining internship and full-time employment with feedlots. Following the Boot Camp, students share individual presentations on relevant industry topics. Presentations are recorded and shared with feedlot managers to further engagement between students and feedlot managers. Later in the semester students also participate in a half-day animal health and cattle processing experience at a feedlot near K-State to provide additional insight and experience with feedlot health management. From surveys following the completion of the Boot Camp portion of the program, more than 96% (91/95) of student participants agreed with the statement, "My interest in pursuing an internship and (or) career in the feedlot industry grew as a result of this Boot Camp." Approximately 45% of students participated in feedlot internships or entered full-time jobs working in a feedlot within the six months after completing the Boot Camp program.

Introduction

Beef cattle ranching and farming, including feedlots and dual-purpose ranching, are collectively the number one employer within the Kansas agriculture industry, contributing approximately \$8.7 billion to the economy of the state of Kansas (Kansas Department of Agriculture, 2020). However, managing the workforce and hiring new qualified employees is a major challenge for many Kansas feedlots. In 2021, "A competitive and competent workforce to meet the diverse and technical needs of the beef

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industry in Kansas,” and “Talent development and educational training opportunities for students preparing for careers in the beef industry,” were outlined as a high-priority outcome in the Kansas 2021 Ag Summit beef sector document (Kansas Department of Agriculture, 2021).

Spearheaded by Midwest PMS, LLC and through collaboration between other feedlot stakeholders, including allied industry, feedlot owners/managers, and Kansas State University, the K-State Feedlot Boot Camp and Teaching Program was developed. The program’s overarching goal is to develop students’ knowledge, skills, and professional relationships in feedlot management to help meet the critical need for trained professionals in the feedlot industry. Specific objectives are to:

- Train students in aspects of feedlot management through a 4-day hands-on, comprehensive “Boot Camp” at western Kansas participating feedlots.
- Enhance students’ likelihood of participating in a feedlot internship experience.
- Cultivate students’ vision of potential career paths within the feedlot and beef cattle industry.

Experimental Procedures

Undergraduate students in the College of Agriculture at Kansas State University have had the opportunity to apply to participate in the K-State Feedlot Boot Camp and Teaching Program from 2019 through 2023. The entirety of the program from the student perspective can be partitioned into the following components:

1. Information Session and Application – fall semester
2. Feedlot Boot Camp Session – January
3. Post-Boot Camp Activities and Expectations – spring semester
4. Feedlot Internship Participation

During the Feedlot Boot Camp session, students were transported to Garden City, KS, for the 4-day hands-on comprehensive training. The Boot Camp included both classroom instruction and hands-on experiences at Reeve Cattle Company, Inc., Poky Feeders, Finney County Feedyard, and Fairleigh Feedyard. Topics addressed included cattle health and nutrition, feedlot design and maintenance, commodity handling, and low-stress cattle handling. A networking dinner was held during the Boot Camp to bring students and feedlot managers together to facilitate students gaining internship and full-time employment opportunities with feedlots.

Following the Boot Camp, students shared individual presentations about industry topics that are recorded and shared with feedlot managers to further engagement between students and feedlot managers. In April, students also participated in a half-day cattle processing experience at a feedlot near Kansas State University to provide additional experience with feedlot health management. Students who completed the Boot Camp, cattle processing experience, and a feedlot internship could earn a \$2,500 scholarship to be applied toward their tuition the following semester.

Results and Discussion

A total of 163 undergraduate students applied to participate in the program in its first five years (2019 - 37; 2020 - 41; 2021 - 23; 2022 - 30; 2023 - 32). Of those applicants, 95 were selected to participate (2019 - 20; 2020 - 21; 2021 - 18; 2022 - 19; 2023 - 17). In surveys following the completion of the Boot Camp portion of the program, over 96% (91/95) of student participants agreed with the statement, “My interest in pursuing an internship and (or) career in the feedlot industry grew as a result of this Boot Camp” (Figure 1). Approximately 45% of participants proceeded to participate in feedlot internships or entered full-time jobs working in a feedlot six months after completing the Boot Camp (Figure 2).

Jenna Hlavaty, 2020 participant and now head of Animal Health and Processing at Cimarron Crossing Feeders near Cimarron, KS, shared that “The Feedlot Boot Camp program is the major reason that I earned a feedlot internship right after Boot Camp and have since been on a career path in the feedlot industry.” Nicole Stafford, 2021 participant, stated, “If it was not for the Feedlot Boot Camp, I wouldn’t have gotten [cattle handling] experience with Tiffany’s [Cattle Company] as well as a want to pursue feedlot consulting after vet school! The Boot Camp really opened up my eyes to so many possibilities for my future, and I’m excited to pursue this track!” A 2023 participant, Ethan Kunkel, noted, “The opportunity created by the Feedlot Boot Camp is next to none. The Feedlot Boot Camp gave me the foundation to have an excellent summer internship at Foote Cattle Company and learn about a part of the cattle industry that I did not know much about. I highly recommend applying to be a part of this opportunity.” Jenna, Nicole and Ethan’s experiences highlight the value of this program in growing the vision students have for feedlot career opportunities as well as facilitating professional relationships to enable their visions to become reality.

Implications

The Feedlot Boot Camp program has made progress in growing student interest and awareness of career opportunities in the feedlot industry and fostering communication between employers and prospective employees.

Acknowledgments

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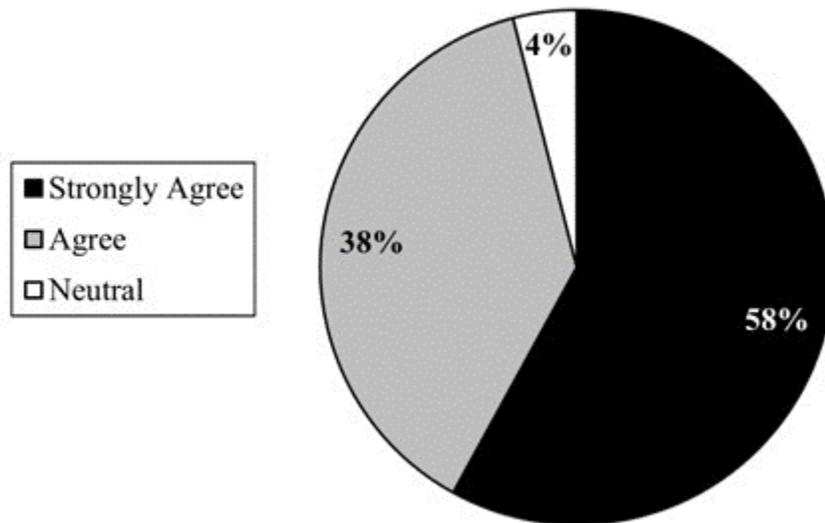


Figure 1. Post-Boot Camp survey “My interest in pursuing an internship and/or career in the feedlot industry grew as a result of this Boot Camp.”

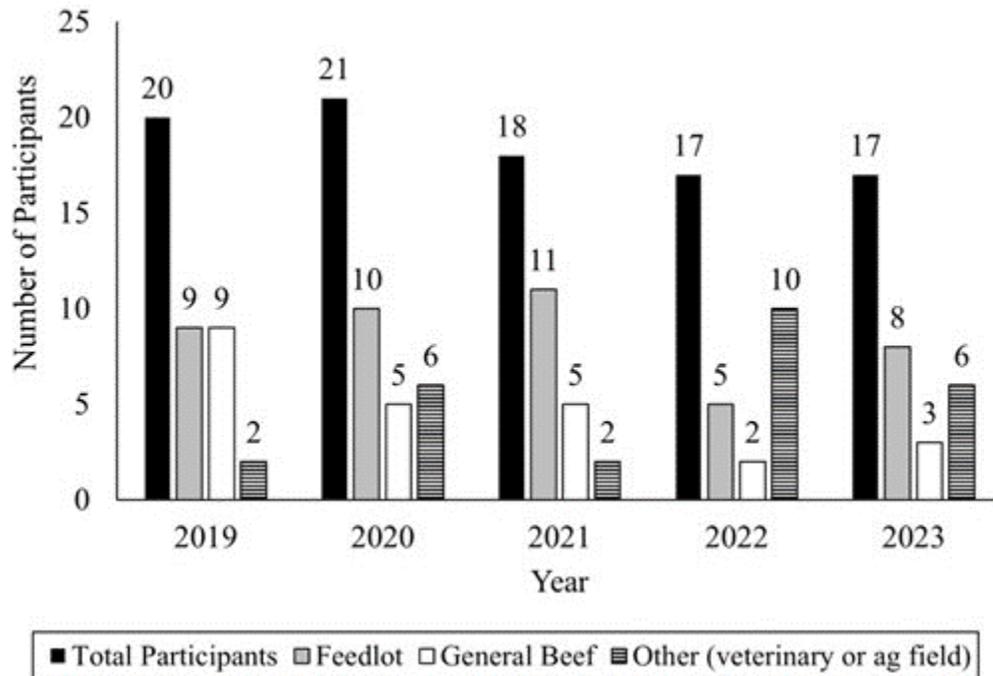


Figure 2. Students’ internship or job path six months after the Boot Camp.