

Critiquing the Contest: Assessing the Benefits of a Collegiate Academic Competition

Research Paper Submission

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Abstract: Academic competitions in the field of agriculture and natural resources encourage students to pursue an industry-related career, enhance the host company's future prospects for employment, and raise funds for the contest facilitator. As such, organizations expend time, money (costs and incentives), and manpower to facilitate academic contests. However, little evidentiary support exists, regarding reasons students choose to participate in them. The purpose of this study was to assess the benefits of the National ACT Critique and Contest, sponsored by the National Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT), in terms of contest participation. Census data was obtained from dues-paying members, including both undergraduate and graduate students, of the National ACT organization. The ACT roster consists of 13 chapters in the United States and one in Canada. Survey participants were asked a series of questions regarding contest cost, structure and application procedures, perceived and actual benefits, opportunity for public recognition, and incentives. Respondents who had never participated in the contest or did not do so in 2008 were also asked about barriers to participation. The results show that perceived value does not necessarily translate to actual contest participation. It is through benefit maximization that students are encouraged to participate. Results indicate this can be done through continuous contest revision and needs assessment. Other academic and professional organizations that host competitions should consider evaluating the preferences and interests of potential contest participants to determine if their contests should be continued, altered, or eliminated.

Keywords: academic competition, contest, participation, benefits, perceptions, value, agricultural communicators

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INTRODUCTION

Academic competitions in the field of agriculture and natural resources are a way to encourage students to pursue an industry-related career in the future. The National Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow's Critique and Contest (ACT Critique and Contest) is one such academic competition that targets college students actively interested in pursuing agricultural communications as a career (National Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow, 2005b).

According to the National ACT Web site (National Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow, 2005a):

The National Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow is a collegiate organization that establishes close relationships with all professional agricultural communication organizations. The purpose of this organization is to (1) stimulate interest in the profession of agricultural communication on the local, national, and international levels; (2) promote the interchange of ideas among students, faculty members at colleges and universities offering professional education in agricultural communication; and (3) provide parties with opportunities for personal and professional growth between students and agricultural communication professionals. Membership is composed of undergraduate and graduate students actively interested in agricultural communication.

National ACT conducts the Critique and Contest, an annual spring event that recognizes exceptional student work (National ACT, 2005a). It also provides students with critiques from agricultural communication professionals. Contestants must be active, dues-paying ACT members to participate. Prizes are awarded to category and division winners. Winning entries in each category are eligible to win the Excellence Award in that division, which has a cash prize (National ACT, 2005a). For the 2008 Critique and Contest, students paid a \$5 cost-per-entry fee to enter the competition. National ACT covers the cost of the first entry, and university chapters have the option to cover the cost of additional entries.

Similar to academic competitions, professional organizations also coordinate these contests to enhance their future prospects for employment by focusing on participants with the highest achievement levels. In the agricultural communication field, such organizations as the Livestock Publications Council; the Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences; and the North American Agricultural Journalists conduct contests. Additionally, several of these professional agriculture and natural resources communication organizations conduct academic competitions for students. Moreover, these organizations expend time, money (costs and incentives), and manpower to facilitate academic contests. However, little evidentiary support exists regarding reasons students choose to participate in them. Therefore, it is vital to discover if there is value, with respect to student benefits, in such competitions. Similarly, few studies exist regarding professional contest participation.

As such, the purpose of this study was to assess the benefits of the National ACT Critique and Contest, sponsored by the National Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow, in terms of contest participation. By assessing the benefits of academic contests, in terms of student participation, the following three questions were addressed: (1) Is there value in hosting academic contests in the field of agricultural and natural resources? (2) What are the specific benefits students receive from contest participation? (3) How can contest benefits be maximized to encourage student participation?

Consequently, this study was based upon Social Exchange Theory, as student participation in the National ACT Critique and Contest represents a cost-benefit relationship (DeLamater, 2006). According to Homans (1961), Social Exchange Theory is “the exchange of activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costly, between at least two

persons” (DeLamater, 2006, p. 54). Therefore, students will be more likely to participate in academic contests if they are perceived as valuable. In other words, the perceived benefits of participation must be greater than the threats.

The objectives of this study were to assess student value in terms of contest participation, as well as the actual benefits students receive from participation, and to determine how to maximize benefits to encourage participation. To achieve the aforementioned objectives, this study analyzed the following factors affecting contest participation under the Social Exchange framework: (1) cost to students, (2) application procedures and contest structure, (3) perceived benefits, (4) contest threats, (5) actual benefits, (6) opportunity for public recognition, and (7) contest incentives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bishop and Walters (2007) stated, “Competitions have been a part of school activities for generations of American students and have served as a means to encourage academic development of students.” Academic competitions may also foster a sense of capability in its participants (Bishop & Walters, 2007). As a result of competing, students’ practical problem-solving skills emerged, were challenged, and were refined (Bishop & Walters, 2007). Bishop and Walters (2007) also stated, “These skills seemed to enhance a sense of personal competence. This perception of personal capability translates as a very high factor influencing career choice.” As such, the results of their study indicated that contest participation influenced career choice for more than 40% of respondents, as well as developed their interests in the competition area (Bishop & Walters, 2007).

Smith and Kahler (1987) stated that in order for academic competitions to be successful, “They must be continuously evaluated and revised” (Johnson, 1991, p. 23). Ozturk and Debelak

(2008) noted that revising the nature and format of existing competitions is favorable. Academic competitions “serve as strong motivators for students by providing an incentive to study and work hard so they can compete at a certain level” (Ozturk & Debelak, 2008, p. 2). The researchers addressed actual benefits gained from contest participation, such as a smooth transition and acquired work habits for sustained accomplishment (Ozturk & Debelak, 2008). They also stated that “positive feedback should be provided throughout the competitive process” and that “rewards in academic competitions should be directly relevant to the nature of the work,” as they “nourish continued interest and motivation,” and help participating students to “pursue long-term achievement in similar activities or fields” (Ozturk & Debelak, 2008, p. 3).

Likewise Grote (1995) and Mann (1984) wrote that academic contest participation is beneficial, as it helps students to further develop knowledge, skills, and interests in the contest area (Abernathy & Vineyard, 2001). In addition, Johnson (1991) addressed student achievement in a state FFA Agricultural Mechanics contest. While he examined contests from the perspective of demographics and their relationship to achievement, he also made the point that such contests are designed to complement classroom instruction.

In contrast, Bergin and Cooks (2000) supported mastery learning situations over competition with respect to cognitive development, as they can lead to increased use of effective learning strategies and deeper processing. In a competitive scenario, success “may be defined as doing better than others rather than as mastering a task or achieving understanding” (Bergin & Cooks, 2000). Specifically, they addressed competition in academic terms, and their study was limited to students of color (Bergin & Cooks, 2000). However, they also stated, “Many people tend to view competition as a good and natural motivating factor. They believe that when people are placed in competitive situations, they are motivated to do their best and to achieve greater

success than if they relied simply on their own desire for mastery and accomplishment” (Bergin & Cooks, 2000).

As such, results indicated that it is natural for students to compete, as most students in the study competed for grades (Bergin & Cooks, 2000). Bergin and Cooks (2000) said, “As long as there is any basis for comparison, American students seem likely to compete spontaneously.” Thus, “In contrast to motivation researchers, students in our study generally thought competition was beneficial. Most seemed to like it” (Bergin & Cooks, 2000).

Students were motivated to compete based on the ability to compare their achievement levels to those of others (Bergin & Cooks, 2000). In addition, they stated that in competitive situations some students do not engage in competition, while others quit during the process (Bergin & Cooks, 2000). Therefore, they recommended that competition goals be “optimally challenging” or “perceived as being within reach but not easy reach” (Bergin & Cooks, 2000). Moreover, “Competition fostered effort and striving and for at least one student, prevented boredom” (Bergin & Cooks, 2000).

Abernathy and Vineyard (2001) investigated the experiences of students who participated in science fairs and the Science Olympiad. In this study, the researchers examined the value reported by students who participate in such contests because “we rarely hear the student’s point of view” (Abernathy & Vineyard, 2001, p. 3). They evaluated the different reward perceptions of students, as well as the varying reasons for participation (Abernathy & Vineyard, 2001). Abernathy and Vineyard (2001) discussed the need for educators to motivate, reward, and encourage students through such contests. Here, the challenge is creating new opportunities that will “entice the greatest number of students while maintaining the level of participation observed” (Abernathy & Vineyard, 2001, p. 8).

Regarding the benefits of professional contest participation, Tiene (1993) examined the various advantages of competing for the Japan Prize, an international award for television programming. The author cited several benefits to competition, including recognition and respect among peers (Tiene, 1993). “In addition to encouraging excellence in instructional television production, the contest serves a second significant professional function. It is a stimulating experience for the educational television professionals who attend, serving as a kind of high level workshop for leaders in the field” (Tiene, 1993). The author also stated that participants who place in the competition or win the overall Japan Prize could potentially gain the ability to secure financial and other resources, thereby improving the quality of subsequent work (Tiene, 1993). Finally, the Tiene (1993) cited participants’ exposure to the work of their competitors as a benefit of competition. In other words, viewing similar programming of excellent quality can facilitate idea formation and provide insight into different instructional styles and production techniques (Tiene, 1993).

METHODOLOGY

This study consisted of a descriptive design, utilizing a five-point, summated rating scale (Likert-type) to assess the benefits of the National ACT Critique and Contest in terms of student participation. It was facilitated through a researcher-developed online survey instrument, created using the Dillman Tailored Design Method (2007). The researchers obtained census data from dues-paying members, including both undergraduate and graduate students, of the National ACT organization (N=301). The ACT roster consists of 13 chapters in the United States and one in Canada.

The researchers divided the 55-question survey instrument into nine parts: (1) cost to students, (2) application procedures and contest structure, (3) perceived benefits, (4) additional

instructions, (5) contest threats, (6) actual benefits, (7) opportunity for public recognition, (8) contest incentives, and (9) demographic information. Questions focused on member perceptions and values. The demographic information section also included one open-ended question, which allowed respondents to provide additional comments and suggestions, regarding the ACT Critique and Contest.

The consent form and online survey were posted on Survey Monkey (<http://SurveyMonkey.com>). A panel of experts, including ACT advisers and national officers, reviewed the instrument for face and content validity. Additionally, the survey instrument was pretested by graduate students and professors in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication at the University of Florida to improve reliability of the instrument. The survey was available between April 23, 2008, and May 30, 2008.

As previously stated, data collection was electronic. Participants were recruited through an e-mail merge system, which creates a uniform distribution list of individual e-mail addresses. National ACT adviser Deb Dunsford, Ph.D., provided all e-mail addresses from the national membership roster. The population list had 282 usable e-mail addresses.

Following the ACT Critique and Contest deadline of April 15, 2008, an instructional e-mail (similar to a cover letter for a direct-mail survey) was sent to each member on the national roster via Survey Monkey (Miller & Smith, 1983). Participants were given a period of one week to take the survey before follow-up e-mails were sent. Follow-up e-mails were sent to non-respondents once per week for three additional weeks (Miller & Smith, 1983). This led to a response rate of 34.0% with 96 respondents, 76 of which were complete respondents. Non-response error was addressed by comparing early to late respondents (Miller & Smith, 1983). Ordinal data were analyzed in SPSS 16.0 to generate descriptive frequencies and means.

Frequency tables and cross tabulations were also utilized. Internal consistency was calculated using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = .722$).

RESULTS

Respondent demographics were predominantly female (86.1%, n=68) and agricultural communication(s) or agricultural journalism majors (88.6%, n=70). Students from 13 of the 14 schools with ACT chapters participated in the survey. Respondents varied, in terms of year in school, with 68.0% (n=56) in their junior year or above (see Table 1). Of total respondents, 46.8% (n=37) had never participated in the National ACT Critique and Contest; also, 36.7% (n=29) had been dues-paying members of ACT for one year or less when they completed the survey.

Table 1.

<i>Respondents' Student Classification (Year in School)</i>		
Classification	N	Percent (%)
Freshman	7	8.9
Sophomore	16	20.3
Junior	20	24.1
Senior	29	38.0
Master's Student	6	7.6
Doctoral Student	1	1.3
Total	79	100

Of the survey participants, 22.8% (n=18) were unsure if their university-level ACT chapter covered the cost of any contest entries. In a cross tabulation, it was discovered that participation in the National ACT Critique and Contest increased from years one to two of membership, with respondents entering the competition for the first time in their second year (n=12). Additionally, it was found in a cross tabulation that total contest participation decreases

over time. Looking at juniors onward, after their first time entering the contest, participation steadily declines (see Table 2).

Table 2.

		<i>Respondents' Student Classification (Year in School)</i>						
		Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Graduate	Doctoral	Total
<i>Respondents'</i>	0	6	7	12	11	1	0	37
<i>Rate of</i>	1	1	7	5	12	1	0	26
<i>Participation</i>	2	0	2	2	5	3	0	12
<i>in Years</i>	3	0	0	0	1	1	0	2
	4	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
	> 4	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
	Total	7	16	19	30	6	1	79

Objective 1: To assess the value of academic contest participation from the student perspective.

To address this objective, respondents were asked a series of questions on contest cost and structure, as well as the perceived benefits of contest participation. In terms of cost to students, respondents favored the current \$5 cost-per-entry fee with 55.0% (n=60) supporting the amount charged. As dollar amount increased, students were less likely to perceive the contest as valuable.

At the \$10 level 43.2% (n=41) disagreed and 34.7% (n=33) strongly disagreed with the statement, "I would be willing to pay \$10 per contest entry." More than three-quarters (79.0%, n=75) of students were more likely to participate in the ACT Critique and Contest if NACT covered the cost of one entry per student into the contest. Similarly, 69.5% (n=66) of respondents would be more likely to participate in the ACT Critique and Contest if their local chapter paid for at least one contest entry (see Table 3).

Table 3.

<i>Respondents' Likelihood of Contest Participation with Financial Support from Local Chapter</i>		
Participation	N	Percent (%)
Strongly Disagree	1	1.0
Disagree	5	5.3
Neutral	23	24.2
Agree	42	44.2
Strongly Agree	24	25.3
Total	95	100

Overall, respondents felt the National ACT Critique and Contest categories were reflective of their academic study program (65.5%, n=55) and professional interests (72.6%, n=61). (See Table 4.) In addition, more than three-quarters of respondents believed contest categories were considered up to date (77.1%, n=64).

Table 4.

<i>Respondents' Beliefs Regarding Contest Categories Reflecting Their Professional Interests</i>		
Participation	N	Percent (%)
Strongly Disagree	1	1.2
Disagree	4	4.8
Neutral	18	21.4
Agree	53	63.1
Strongly Agree	8	9.5
Total	84	100

However, respondents indicated there was a lack of knowledge, regarding appropriate contest submission material; 16.1% (n=14) did not believe or were unsure that unpublished materials could be entered into the contest. That number increased to 17.9% (n=15) when asked if they believed published materials were appropriate for contest submission. When asked if they

knew how to submit ideas to improve the National ACT Critique and Contest, 65.5% of respondents (n=55) did not know how to submit their suggestions to National ACT.

Perceived benefits of contest participation were both short- and long-term. Regarding short-term benefits, 79.3% (n=65) of respondents said the National ACT Critique and Contest would encourage personal improvement, in terms of agricultural communication, and 56.7% (n=47) believed entering the contest would help them make industry connections. Long-term, 85.6% (n=71) of respondents said entering the contest would benefit them professionally in the future. As such, 81.5% (n=66) of students surveyed felt the National ACT Critique and Contest was worthwhile. In a cross tabulation between the respondents' classification, as determined by year in school, and perception of value, as the students' year in school increased, contest worth moved from neutrality toward strong agreement (see Table 5).

Table 5.

		<i>Respondents' Perception Contest is Worthwhile (n)</i>			
		Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
<i>Respondents' Classification</i>	Freshman	3	3	1	7
	Sophomore	1	8	6	15
	Junior	4	12	3	19
	Senior	7	15	7	29
	Master's	0	3	2	5
	Doctoral	0	0	1	1
Total		15	41	20	76

Respondents were then asked a series of questions regarding past and present National ACT Critique and Contest participation. Those who had never participated in the competition, as well as those who did not participate in 2008, were asked to supply the reason they chose not to participate. Of the respondents that did not participate in the National ACT Critique and Contest

in 2008, 54.3% (n=19) said the reason was the time and effort it took to prepare and submit entries, while 42.9% (n=15) believed they had no appropriate work to submit. In a cross tabulation, there was some overlap between those who did not submit work with those who were unsure or did not believe that submitting certain types of materials were appropriate. In addition, 22.9% (n=8) said unclear instructions was a reason they did participate, while only 5.9% (n=2) said cost was the reason.

Objective 2: To assess the actual benefits students receive from academic contest participation.

As part of the aforementioned series of questions, respondents who said they participated in the contest prior to 2008 were asked about the types of actual benefits they received from contest participation, thus satisfying the second objective of the study. Perceived benefits and actual benefits varied widely. As previously stated, 56.7% (n=47) of respondents believed entering the contest would help them make industry connections, and 85.6% (n=71) said entering the contest would benefit them professionally in the future.

Only 6.5% (n=2) respondents said they had actually met one or more people in the agriculture and natural resources industry by participating in the National ACT Critique and Contest. Similarly, only one respondent (3.2%) agreed to benefitting professionally, either through a job or internship, through contest participation. Of those who had previously entered the contest, a little more than one-quarter (31.2%, n=10) said they had actually become better agricultural communicators as a result of contest entrance (see Table 6), whereas 79.3% (n=65) perceived this as a benefit in the previous section. Similarly, 32.3% (n=10) felt they had received helpful critiques from contest judges.

Table 6.

Respondents' Perceived Improvement as Agricultural Communicators, Due to Contest Participation

Improvement	N	Percent (%)
Strongly Disagree	3	9.4
Disagree	5	15.6
Neutral	14	43.8
Agree	9	28.1
Strongly Agree	1	3.1
Total	32	100

Objective 3: To determine how to maximize benefits to encourage participation.

To achieve the study's third and final objective, the researchers asked questions regarding contest incentives and opportunities for public recognition of winners. By determining the benefits participants find most attractive – and those they can do without – contest benefits can be maximized to encourage student participation. The researchers began by determining students' preferred methods of public recognition.

More than half of the respondents would be more likely to participate in the contest if winners' names were posted on the National ACT Web site (55.2%, n=43) or included in the National ACT newsletter (57.2%, n=44). Nearly two-thirds (64.1%, n=50) would be encouraged to enter the competition if a list of contest winners was sent to university administration for their respective universities. Respondents (79.5%, n=62) highly favored sending a list of contest winners to agricultural communication professionals (see Table 7).

Table 7.

Respondents' Likelihood of Contest Participation When List of Winners Sent to Industry Professionals

Participation	n	Percent (%)
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	2	2.6
Neutral	14	17.9
Agree	34	43.6
Strongly Agree	28	35.9
Total	78	100

Additionally, the researchers addressed the extent to which students knew about contest prizes. Only 18.3% (n=14) of respondents were fully aware of the prizes for being a winner in the National ACT Critique and Contest. In terms of prize preference, 40.3% (n=31) of respondents said the possibility of receiving a certificate encourages them to participate in the contest.

Two-thirds (66.7%, n=59) said the possibility of receiving a cash prize for winning the Excellence Award for a particular division in the National ACT Critique and Contest encourages them to participate. However, only 19.8% (n=15) and 16.9% (n=13) of respondents said they would not participate in the contest if these awards were not offered, respectively. The largest deterrent, regarding participation, would be the elimination of the professional critique component of the competition. Under this scenario of eliminating the professional critique, 57.2% (n=44) of respondents would not enter the contest (see Table 8).

Table 8.

Respondents' Likelihood of Contest Participation Without the Possibility of a Professional Critique

Participation	N	Percent (%)
Strongly Disagree	15	19.4
Disagree	29	37.7
Neutral	19	24.7
Agree	14	18.2
Strongly Agree	0	0.0
Total	77	100

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides support for continuous assessment of academic contests, making revisions where necessary. Based on the principle of Social Exchange, an academic contest must be perceived as relevant, and therefore valuable to students in terms of structure and application, cost, benefits, and incentives, in order for them to participate. For example, the structure of academic contests must reflect participants' academic and professional interests; as such competitions help them to further develop knowledge, skills, and interests in the contest area (Abernathy & Vineyard, 2001). Thus, because students are more likely to participate in academic contests they perceive as valuable (Homans, 1961), this study found that in order to increase students' perceived value, regarding participation, contest benefits must be determined and maximized.

However, this study also determined value must not only be present, regarding student perceptions, but it must be operationalized via contest benefits in order to bridge the gap between the perception that academic contests are worthwhile and actual participation. In the study, no respondents stated the contest was not worthwhile. While 81.5% (n=66) respondents agreed or

strongly agreed the National ACT Critique and Contest was worthwhile, 51.9% (n=41) of respondents had never participated. Further, of the 41 students who never participated in the contest, 30 said it was worthwhile to do so (73.2%).

Overall, as cost to students increased, their willingness to participate in the contest decreased. They were also resistant to change, with respect to altering the cost structure of the contest (i.e. raising dues to pay for contest entry or setting a flat rate for contest entry). Here, students found value in a contest they determined to be cost-effective. Students were more willing to participate if the cost of some entries was covered by either the national organization or their local university chapter. As an implication of the study, National ACT may wish to consider encouraging all chapters to support student participation by funding entries and informing students of the option, as six (7.6%) students from four different schools believed their university-level chapter did not provide funding, and 18 (22.8%) students from eight different schools were unsure if their local chapter funded contest entries.

Another key finding is that students were more likely to participate in an academic contest that was reflective of their academic study program and professional interests. In addition, participants value a contest that contains up-to-date content (i.e. digital photography, podcasts, Web design, etc.), which, in turn, reflects technologies used in the classroom, as well as by industry professionals. As such, 81.4% (n=36) of respondents that participated in the 2008 National ACT Critique and Contest considered contest categories up to date.

Additionally, it was found that total contest participation decreased over time. Looking at juniors onward, after their first time entering the contest, participation steadily declined. Perhaps this is because the actual benefits of the contest were not commensurate with those perceived by entrants. Under Social Exchange Theory, contest participants must continue to perceive contest

benefits as outweighing the costs (Homans, 1961). In this case, the most prevalent threat to contest entrance was time and effort. Therefore, students who expended time and effort to participate in the contest but did not gain a return on their investment, in terms of their perceived benefits, would not likely participate again.

Although this study is limited, in terms of contest representation, its findings may impact academic and professional agriculture and natural resources organizations that host similar contests, as they will be able to replicate this study to assess the benefits of their respective competitions. In order for contests to be successful, revision and restructuring must take place on a regular basis (Johnson, 1991). However, in order to improve a contest or to decide a contest is not worthwhile, an organization must determine if the benefits of its contest outweigh the costs. The findings of this study also support maximizing contest participation, with respect to the agricultural organizations that expend time, money, and manpower to facilitate contests. Such organizations hope to gain a return on their investment (i.e. time and effort spent to initiate academic competitions). However, if the return is not perceived as substantial or even beneficial, an organization may choose to eliminate a contest entirely or redesign it to maximize benefits to itself (as the contest host) and participants alike.

As such, this study is important to any organization that utilizes its resources to host a competitive event, and its findings may lead to larger-scale quantitative and qualitative studies, regarding academic and professional contests. Overall, this study found that value must be operationalized in terms of actual benefits to encourage contest participation among agriculture and natural resources students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this study, the main threat regarding contest participation was the time and effort it took students to prepare entries for the contest. In terms of appropriate submissions, students have the ability to enter personal, academic, and professional works into the competition. However, a number of students believed these items could not be submitted. One recommendation is to make sure potential participants are fully informed regarding contest rules and regulations. Making students aware that they do not need to do additional work to participate in the contest but can submit items they have already completed should decrease confusion in this regard. In addition, making submissions more Web friendly would decrease the amount of time it takes students to prepare and submit entries and supplemental forms. Information should also be communicated with respect to contest concerns, questions, or suggestions.

Another recommendation, based on this study's results, is to target students who are new to the organization. Whether freshmen or older students who are in the first year of ACT membership, these students should be targeted by the national organization and encouraged to submit work to the contest, citing actual benefits received by members. Doing so would increase students' perception of value, and by explicitly citing actual benefits, participation among newer members may be increased.

Most importantly, it is imperative for National ACT to ensure that perceived benefits translate into actual benefits for those who enter the contest. Otherwise, students may not continue to participate. To improve in this area, ACT should encourage professionals attending the Agricultural Media Summit (where the National ACT Convention and National ACT Critique and Contest awards ceremony is held) to be present before, during, and after the ACT awards ceremony or, at the very least, distribute a list of contest entrants and winners to them. By

making contacts with industry professionals, students are more likely to benefit professionally, through a job or internship, by entering the contest. Additionally, critiques should be constructive and helpful, and they should be distributed in a timely manner in order for students to improve their agricultural communication skills, based on contest entry. Returning contest submissions to advisers and students at the convention or soon after the convention will allow students to gain access to their critiqued entries in a timely fashion.

Finally, it is recommended that ACT reevaluate its contest incentives. The research shows that students are more encouraged to participate in the contest, based on the possibility of having winners' names posted on the national Web site, written in the newsletter, or sent in a list to administration and industry professionals. Students are also encouraged to participate if their local chapter or the national organization provides financial support for contest entrance. In order for the National ACT Critique and Contest to be more cost-effective for its host organization, it is recommended that National ACT encourages university-level chapters to fund contest entries, as opposed to doing so itself.

Similarly, contest incentives must be clearly defined and communicated. Students should be made aware of the specific incentives of the contest (i.e. certificate, critique, cash prize). The majority of students who participated in the survey said they were not fully aware of the different prizes offered for being a winner in the National ACT Critique and Contest. Moreover, by eliminating unnecessary prizes and incentives, ACT will also reduce its amount of resource expenditure.

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