



DAIRY CHALLENGE FOCUSES on the team concept to identify, troubleshoot, and, eventually, improve challenges found on commercial dairy farms.

From class to career: the hands-on approach of Dairy Challenge

For the past 10 years, the Dairy Challenge program has helped some 2,800 students apply classroom knowledge directly to the field.

by Casey Hushon

TRANSLATING college concepts into hands-on, job-related skills is a challenge each new graduate faces. While these students have the knowledge to be successful, making the leap to applying classroom information to real-world situations can be much more difficult. Since 2002, one collegiate program that



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has successfully paired in-classroom learning with on-farm decision-making and management is the North American Intercollegiate Dairy Challenge.

Dairy Challenge offers a unique perspective that encourages college students to take their in-class learnings and showcase their abilities on-farm. Working in four-person teams, students visit a dairy operation, review the on-farm records, and ask questions to the producer about their operation. Using this information, the team makes recommendations about how the farm can improve herd performance, health, production, and, most importantly, profitability to a panel of industry judges and the herd owner.

The first contest was held in April 2002 at Michigan State University with 13 participating schools. Organizers had the goal to better train future dairy producers, industry consultants, and veterinarians through an on-farm management contest. Nine years later, 47 schools participated in four regional con-

tests, and 30 schools were involved with the national contest. Since its beginnings, more than 2,800 youth have participated in the North American Intercollegiate Dairy Challenge, allowing them to translate classroom knowledge to on-farm problem solving.

Held each year, the North American Intercollegiate Dairy Challenge rotates around the country to allow students to investigate dairies in different regions of the United States. The national contest consists primarily of college juniors and seniors who have completed and excelled in higher-level dairy courses.

Four regional Dairy Challenge events give more students a chance to learn. The regional contests mix students together, so teams are comprised of individuals from different universities. These aggregate teams add to the "real world" application, adapting and working cooperatively with new people. Regional contests serve as an educational experience to help teams prepare for the national contest while allowing more students and colleges to participate. Through this hands-on approach, students from across the country are able to improve their dairy management, communication, and business skills which helps prepare highly qualified graduates to lead and further improve the dairy industry.

As Dairy Challenge celebrates its 10th anniversary, successful alumni of the program believe the event helped prepare them for their new careers from educational, networking, and social perspectives. The 10th national contest was held March 31 to April 2, 2011, in Hickory, N.C., hosted by North Carolina State University and Virginia Tech.



Molly Florent Sloan, a 2006 Dairy Science graduate from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and now an elite account manager with Alta Genetics, participated in the National Dairy Challenge contest in 2006 in Idaho.

"I truly valued the experience because it enabled our team to take classroom theories and create practical applications on-farm," shares Molly.

Other participants, like Chad Wall, believe Dairy Challenge helped to reinforce many of the concepts he had learned during his four years at Cornell University. Chad is currently a first-year veterinary student at Cornell.

"For nearly a month prior to competition, our team would meet every morning with our advisor, Mike VanAmburgh, to refresh ourselves on the concepts needed to be successful in Dairy Challenge, as well as learning to work together as an efficient team," explains Chad. "That experience in particular is what made the Dairy Challenge so successful for me."

Skills used beyond contest


And the success from Dairy Challenge didn't stop at the contest. Students like Molly and Chad used their skills to make career decisions and continue to utilize their relationships from Dairy Challenge today.

"Several of the contacts I made from the competing teams are now people I deal with in the industry every day," says Molly.

While the take away from Dairy Challenge has left an impression on many, Chad and Molly identify the program as one that helped solidify career goals and their role on farms in the future.

"One of the major ways in which the Dairy Challenge has influenced my potential career choices is that it has opened my scope of focus and improved my communication skills tremendously," says Chad. "I am a first-year veterinary student, and I plan to become a food animal practitioner involved in the dairy industry. I hope to find myself in the same sort of niche that I found during the Dairy Challenge, as a member of a professional team, meeting and exploring the opportunities available on a dairy farm."

For Molly, the contest showed just how important the team-approach to managing the dairy can be and has helped her be successful in her current position with Alta Genetics.

"The Dairy Challenge made me realize that setting up efficient reproductive programs goes beyond simply picking bulls and breeding cows, but instead ties goals, monitoring systems, economics, and the right people to every part of the plan," shares Molly. "I knew I wanted to work for a company that empowered me to be on the forefront of that challenge right out of college." 

How do I get involved?

- For current college students, talk with your dairy or animal science professors about Dairy Challenge and get involved.
- For universities that have not participated previously, visit www.dairychallenge.org for more information.
- For companies interested in sponsoring, learn more at www.dairychallenge.org.
- Alumni can share the impact Dairy Challenge has had on their lives and careers at http://dairychallenge.org/alumni_challenge.php.
- To learn more and get important news and updates, "like" the North American Intercollegiate Dairy Challenge Facebook page or follow @DairyChallenge on Twitter.