



AAEA ACCESS TASKFORCE
INTERIM REPORT
JULY 2024

Preliminary Findings and Recommendations

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AAEA'S COMMITMENT TO INCLUSION

An introduction to the AAEA Access Taskforce composition, goals, and activities

PURPOSE

This taskforce was created in August 2023 to support AAEA's commitment to creating a welcoming professional community where diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging are core values for excellence in everything we do. Inclusion is a commitment that those who are historically or systematically marginalized are treated equitably, feel respected, and can fully participate. To build and support a culture of inclusion we need this commitment and a sense of responsibility from individual members and organizational leaders.

In doing this work, it is important to recognize intersectionality in structural and systemic barriers: **how do different dimensions of marginalization impact the ability to engage and benefit from opportunities in the applied economics profession? How can we, as members and institutions that support the profession, act to shift the culture?** Inclusion is key to supporting positive engagement in the profession and impact on society.

We recognize that this work will be slow and requires a long-term commitment from leaders in the AAEA community. We also acknowledge that this work requires emotional labor, in addition to intellectual and physical effort, that should be recognized.

GOALS

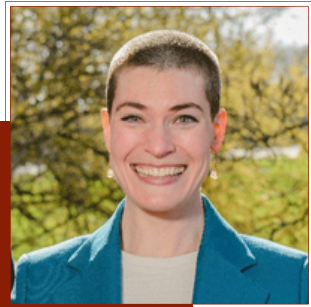
Our overarching goal is to identify concerns that limit members of the AAEA from fully participating in the professional association, including the summer meetings, and to develop recommendations that can increase access and inclusion in activities and initiatives. We started by identifying four goals as a first step:

- Understand member needs and barriers or challenges to participating in the AAEA summer meetings and the professional community
- Identify opportunities to increase membership engagement
- Identify opportunities to increase access to the professional network
- Identify resource needs and make recommendations to the AAEA Board

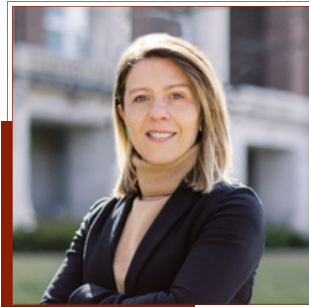


MEET THE TEAM

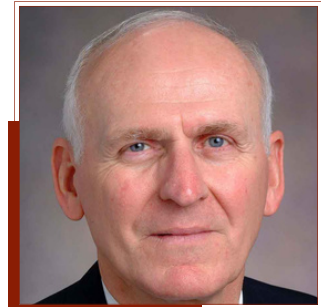
Members of the Access Taskforce represent several sections, including the Committee on Opportunities and Status of Blacks in Agricultural Economics (COSBAE), the Committee on Women in Agricultural Economics (CWAE), Chairs, Heads, and Administrators (CHAIRS), Graduate Students (GSS), and Seniors in the Profession, to ensure that diverse voices are represented in the process of gathering information, interpreting data, and identifying priorities for the AAEA Executive Board.



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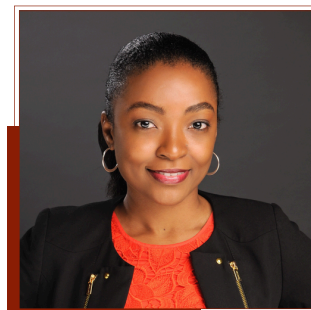
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ACTIVITIES

Taskforce Meetings

We met monthly to develop a process for gathering input from members to understand the needs, challenges, and opportunities for broader participation in the AAEA. We started by assessing our capacity and constraints, and established a workflow process so that all members of the taskforce could contribute effectively. Meetings were held virtually via Zoom, and meeting notes were maintained to record discussions for taskforce members who missed a meeting.



“ We agreed to allocate 1-2 hours per week for work on this taskforce.



While the list of targeted sub-communities within AAEA is not exhaustive (e.g., international scholars in low- and middle-income countries being a notable group we were not able to reach), we included as many voices as we could in the initial consultation to shape the conversation and the information we need to gather from the members at large.

Key Audiences

As a first step to understanding gaps in access and member needs, we identified the following groups in the agricultural and applied economics community (members and non-members) to consult for input:

- Members in minority-serving institutions and institutions focused on undergraduate education (i.e., HBCU/1890/1994 universities)
- Caregivers and people facing career interruptions
- Graduate Students
- Senior members of the profession
- Quasi- government and Industry professionals

ACTIVITIES

Consultative Process

We organized **three one-hour virtual focus group discussions** (Nov 13, 2023; Feb 9, 2024; Feb 12, 2024) and **met with 38 AAEA members** across the first four targeted audience groups. We asked three open-ended questions to seek input on:

1. what is the value to you from being a member of the AAEA?
2. what barriers and challenges do you experience in engaging with the professional community?
3. what can the AAEA leadership do to support members and facilitate greater participation and engagement?

Focus group participants were recruited using a stratified random sampling approach from the roster of AAEA members to include 4-6 members within each targeted audience group. For all focus groups, except the Seniors group, we invited early- to mid-career members (e.g., graduate students, assistant profs., and associate profs.) to share their experiences and suggestions.

We use this input to form the basis of this interim report and to develop a member survey to collect more systematic information on member needs and potential barriers to fully participating in the association.



Industry Conversations

Recognizing that industry professionals (i.e., those outside academia and government) are unlikely to spend 60-75 minutes participating in a focus group discussion, we elected to conduct short (10-minute) phone interviews with an email reply option instead. Taskforce members solicited participation from members and former members employed by for-profits, non-profits, quasi-government, and membership organizations, and asked three similar open-ended questions. Information was collected via email or short (10 - 30 minute) Zoom calls.

This group was least likely to participate when solicited. Non-participants either did not respond to emails or responded that they no longer participate in AAEA and do not have much to add. Those who did respond generally fell into three sub-categories:

- economists in quasi-government organizations (e.g., Farm Credit Administration, Federal Reserve Bank);
- economists at cooperatively-owned or membership organizations (e.g., commodity organizations, lending cooperatives); and
- economists in the corporate sector (e.g., Amazon, Abbott Labs, Hatfield Consulting Group).

WHAT WE LEARNED

TANGIBLE COSTS



Members from marginalized groups face tangible costs that can often outweigh the uncertain or unpredictable benefits they experience from attending the annual meetings. While some challenges are common across groups, each group also faces unique difficulties that prevent them from accessing the professional network.

We note that the challenges discussed below reflect the experiences of focus group participants and may not be representative. See the Appendix for a detailed summary of input by audience group.

01. Financial Costs

All groups said that the costs of attending AAEA meetings are often prohibitive, particularly due to location. The exclusion of food from registration adds on-site expenses. Members from Industry, 1890 institutions, and graduate students receive little to no travel support, and caregivers face additional costs for bringing family or arranging alternatives. Retired senior members often pay out of pocket.

03. Time Costs

Submission deadlines for presentations and track sessions occur so early that many members are caught unaware. Additionally, the timing of the annual meetings in summer poses challenges for those with more stability during the school year. The length of the meeting often requires at least 3 nights at the conference.

02. Information Costs

The lack of clear information about the Association, annual meetings, and available support adds costs for members. Some institutions have strong networks to introduce students to the AAEA, leaving many graduate students struggling to apply, attend, and succeed. Inefficiencies arise from inconsistent support and messaging, with caregivers often unaware or uncertain about childcare availability and quality, making participation challenging.

04. Opportunity Costs

When funding is limited to one conference per year, members prioritize those more relevant to their research community, like the Association of 1890 Research Directors (ARD) meetings. Early career environmental economists find the AERE meeting more helpful for feedback and networking.

WHAT WE LEARNED

INACCESSIBLE BENEFITS



Members from marginalized groups, who do not have strong networks in the profession, also face barriers that prevent them from benefitting from opportunities intended to be universal. Cultural biases and limited access to resources can hinder professional growth, member engagement, and perpetuate existing inequities.

We note that the challenges discussed below reflect the experiences of focus group participants and may not be representative. See the Appendix for a detailed summary of input by audience group.

01. Networking Opportunities

Members at various career stages expressed concerns about networking, emphasizing the importance of timing and limited opportunities to connect ahead of the meeting. Additional issues include night-time scheduling of events, cramped reunion spaces, and challenges faced by international scholars, graduate students, and those with limited networks in making connections at the meetings.

03. Sense of Belonging

Several focus group participants felt their identities were not welcomed at AAEA annual meetings. They struggled with the timing of reunions and networking opportunities, and felt social pressure against bringing children and struggled at social events if they did not drink alcohol.

02. Quality of Research Feedback

Some AAEA members questioned the quality of the research presented and the comments received. Poorly attended sessions fail to provide substantive feedback, hindering authors' ability to improve and publish their work. Additionally, end-of-meeting time slots disadvantage new and early-career presenters.

04. Mentorship

The lack of mentorship at the conference limits opportunities for guidance and professional development. First-time participants, students, and members from universities that do not host reunions struggle to meet senior colleagues.

PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

At the outset, we note that these recommendations are preliminary, based on suggestions from participants in the three focus group discussions and discussions among taskforce members. In assessing needs and ways in which the organization can support members, it is important to recognize intersectionality in structural and systemic barriers that marginalize and exclude groups of members from fully engaging in the applied economics profession.

Investment in inclusion should be seen as a commitment to core values rather than a business case of net benefits ([Bethea 2020](#); [Georgia and Rattan 2022](#)), and we acknowledge that cultural change to center inclusion and belonging for all members will be a slow and gradual process and requires long-term commitment from the profession at large. We have therefore suggested short- and long-term recommendations based on financial impact and the need for due process and sufficient lead time to implement change.

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

Reduce social and cultural barriers

- Improve networking opportunities and social events
 - Organize events for first-time participants and those not part of reunions.
 - Happening in AAEA 2024, thanks to the Mentoring Committee and Dr. Zoë Plakias (Chair).
 - Add a graduate student social event and a reunion event for 1890 Institutions
 - Ensure receptions and socials offer a variety of non-alcoholic options.
 - Schedule socials/reunions throughout the day to accommodate parents with young children.
- Support to navigate the meetings
 - Implement a buddy system pairing experienced participants with newcomers, especially students, and members from underrepresented groups.
 - Create an interactive toolkit for first-time participants with tips on navigating meetings, reunions, and track sessions.

Reduce financial barriers

- Find ways to reduce accommodation costs
 - Coordinate blocks of hotel rooms in less expensive hotels near the conference venue.
 - Create an online forum for members to connect and share rooms at conference hotels.
- Support for Childcare
 - Offer flexible grants for members with caregiving responsibilities to travel with a companion for childcare or arrange childcare assistance at the conference location.
 - Allow caregivers to apply for the grant to leave children at home with a special caregiver, like a grandparent, which could be more cost-effective for some. We recognize that this option can be challenging to implement and requires careful evaluation of applications.

PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase accessibility

- Program Materials and Presentations
 - Provide alternatives to smartphone apps, like PDFs, for accessing conference information to accommodate individuals with disabilities.
 - This has been done recently. Let's keep this up!
 - Include closed captions for keynote lectures and presentations to assist people with hearing impairment.
- Conference accommodations
 - Ensure sessions on similar topics are close together to minimize walking.
 - Reserve dedicated space in sessions and luncheons for wheelchair users, service animals, and sign language interpreters.
 - Block ADA-compliant rooms at the conference hotel and ensure conference rates apply.

Broaden Participation from Industry and Government

- Schedule industry-relevant track sessions in a single day to reduce time away from work for industry members.
 - Offer reduced registration fees for limited participation.
- Create partnerships between academics and experts in stakeholder interaction, such as membership group economists and Extension economists, to support policymakers and amplify academic messages.
- Foster joint sessions between industry professionals and academics working on common issues.

Opportunities for mentorship and career development

- Increase mentoring opportunities with workshops and sessions on job market preparation.
 - Highlight and promote regular events hosted by sections like COSBAE, CWAE, GSS, and the Mentoring Committee to increase awareness and attention to access and inclusion issues.
- Implement a coffee match-up program for early career scholars to connect with experienced members.

Improve Communication with Members

- Offer a virtual information session in the fall for graduate students and early career scholars about the AAEA, annual meeting activities, section membership benefits, and event deadlines.



PRELIMINARY **RECOMMENDATIONS**

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

Reduce financial barriers

- Reduce conference costs for students and members from minority-serving institutions.
- Allow single-day registration at reduced cost for senior members who want limited participation.
- Consider hosting AAEA meetings in smaller cities with major airports, such as Indianapolis, Detroit, or Atlanta, to reduce travel costs.
- Encourage sections to reduce or eliminate fees for members without institutional support, like students and those from minority-serving institutions.
- Enable discounts for members to use nationwide childcare services, such as KinderCare and Bright Horizons.

Create a Culture of Inclusion and Belonging

- Rethink structure and experience at social events
 - Distribute reunions throughout the day to accommodate members with caregiving responsibilities.
 - Organize reunions and networking opportunities for members from 1890 institutions.
 - Increase unstructured meeting time and support affinity-group-based networking, like the CSQIEP-sponsored LGBTQ+ happy hour at AAEA 2024.
- Increase visibility and recognition of the work of members from minority-serving institutions.
 - Highlight members from historically excluded groups in AAEA communications, such as news features and member spotlights.
 - Increase efforts to nominate members from historically excluded groups for the highest association awards, like AAEA Fellow and distinguished teaching awards.
 - Continue efforts to increase representation on the AAEA Board of Directors
- Support and recognize the service that members provide for the organization
 - Waive conference registration fees and provide travel support for section leaders who do not receive travel funding for the AAEA annual meeting
 - Prioritize support for student leaders of the Graduate Student Section and other under-resourced sections
 - Highlight service contributions in regular AAEA communications to demonstrate value to the organization
- Develop accountability mechanisms (e.g., anonymous reporting/feedback) to internalize codes of conduct and an inclusive mindset.



PRELIMINARY **RECOMMENDATIONS**

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

Improve Communication

- Invest in content development for the AAEA website and newsletters.
 - Proactively seek member highlights to better represent marginalized groups rather than relying on self-reported news.
- Provide early information about activities and support available at annual meetings.
- Highlight and promote events hosted year-round by sections to increase awareness and attention to access and inclusion issues.

Broaden participation from Industry and Government Sectors

- Restructure conference registration for industry participants who may not attend the entire conference. Some employers will pay for meeting registrations that include membership but not for association memberships alone.
- Rotate Washington, D.C., as a regular meeting location (e.g., every three years) to facilitate attendance by government and industry members whose employers do not fund their participation.
- Develop an industry outlook track session or keynote panel at the meetings or virtually.
- Create an Industry Professionals Section, leveraging interest from existing members and partners in agricultural commodity organizations.
 - Offer a teaser membership rate for the first year to build momentum.

Logistical support for members

- Connect with extension educators, departments of education, and department of family sciences in local universities to identify early childhood educators who can help with providing childcare and/or provide information about summer camps for children.

NEXT STEPS

Caveats

The preliminary recommendations in this report are based on discussions among taskforce members and input from focus group participants. While we have explored a wide range of challenges that can limit participation and access in the AAEA community, our findings are not comprehensive. We note some of the key limitations in our preliminary report:

- Focus groups did not include all member groups. Notably, the voices of international scholars from low and middle-income countries are not reflected, which limits the comprehensiveness of our findings.
- The discussions and recommendations from focus group participants largely centered on the summer annual meetings as members prioritized participation in the annual meetings. For a holistic view, we need broader input on year-round programming and engagement opportunities outside these meetings.
- While we hope instances of discrimination, harassment, and bullying are minimal, our recommendations do not explicitly address situations requiring grievance processes and strong actions. This leaves a gap in addressing serious issues that may arise within the organization.



Next Steps

We will incorporate feedback from the AAEA leadership and develop a short survey to gather input from the broader membership. With feedback from members, we will prioritize recommendations to the AAEA Board.





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was only possible because of the 45+ AAEA members, including students, faculty, senior scholars, and industry professionals who took the time to share their experiences and insight by participating in the three focus group discussions.

We also acknowledge the commitment and effort of all members of this taskforce, with 400+ hours of cumulative work, to gather and synthesize information that informs our recommendations and to develop this report.



If you have questions, comments, or suggestions, please feel free to contact us.



Email

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APPENDIX

In the appendix, we share a more detailed summary of the feedback from focus group discussions with each audience group.

APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Target Audience #1: Members in minority-serving institutions and institutions focused on undergraduate education

Value of being a member of the AAEA

- Building a professional network
- Connecting with friends and former colleagues/classmates
- Professional development and Mentorship
- Opportunity to present and get feedback on research
- Being exposed to state-of-the-art research and new empirical techniques

Challenges and Barriers that prevent full participation in the AAEA Community

- Poor session organization given the clustering of similar topics.
- Poor networking opportunities, job market support, and limited feedback on presented research.
- Financial burden on underfunded schools (e.g., registration, travel, hotel costs)
- Lack of mentoring opportunities for students and early-career scholars from smaller schools
- Inadequate focus on family attendance and budgetary restrictions, particularly in the selection of conference locations.

Suggestions to increase access and improve experience

- Offer scholarships and discounts for members without institutional support, particularly early career scholars.
 - Include membership fees in conference registration to reduce overall costs.
 - Reduce or eliminate section fees, especially for underrepresented institutions.
- Enhance capacity-building for faculty and students through cross-institution collaboration.
- Choose affordable locations and provide daycare services.
- Organize sessions by topic to improve management and avoid overlap.
- Promote small gatherings and increased interactions.
- Implement more mentoring activities for graduate students, including workshops and dedicated sessions at annual meetings.
- Update the AAEA website to be more informative and interactive, including sponsor activities.
 - Recognize and highlight members from 1890 institutions and international scholars.
- Encourage collaboration between larger and smaller universities, especially 1890 schools.
- Enhance visibility and recognition of minority institute achievements to foster participation.



APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Target Audience #2: Caregivers and people experiencing career interruptions

Value of being a member of the AAEA

- Building and maintaining a professional network
- Opportunity to present and get feedback on research
- Learn from others in the field/research area
- Section Leadership opportunities
- Mentorship

Challenges and Barriers that prevent full participation in the AAEA Community

- Cost of travel with (and even without) child(ren)
- Lack of (timely) information on childcare options
- Limited networking opportunities during the day and the lack of unstructured time
- Lack of family-friendly events
- Inconvenient timing and locations of the annual conferences
- Lack of online options for joining and presenting at annual conferences
 - AAEA competes with other organizations in terms of conferences quality, feedback on research, and early proposal deadlines/structure of proposal system.

Suggestions to increase access and improve experience

- Provide onsite childcare with early information available at the time of abstract submission.
- Offer scholarships or assistance for traveling with a childcare companion.
- Raise awareness about the impact of temporary professional interruptions.
- Provide specific job market resources.
- Offer discounts for nationwide childcare chains like KinderCare and Bright Horizons.
- Partner with local universities to identify early childhood educators for childcare services.
- Facilitate coordination among parents bringing their children to the conference.

APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Target Audience #3: Graduate Students

Value of being a member of the AAEA

- Networking opportunities and Mentorship
- Opportunity to present and get feedback on research
- Developing a professional identity
- Pre- and post-conference events
- Opportunity to learn about job openings through section listservs.

Challenges and Barriers that prevent full participation in the AAEA Community

- Financial barriers:
 - High costs associated with attending meetings, particularly the expense of conference hotels, which can be prohibitive.
 - Difficulty in securing funding for the entire duration of the meeting.
- Social barriers:
 - Relatively few social events, and the ones that do exist often have limitations.
 - Overcrowded reunions can prevent meaningful social interactions, especially for students and international scholars who have relatively shallow networks.
 - Reunions are hosted by major Ivy League and R1 schools, which can make students from other institutions feel isolated and socially uncomfortable about joining these meetings.
 - Difficulties in social interactions are further coupled with an absent mentorship program, where students lack opportunities to interact with mentors and peers, increasing feelings of isolation and limiting professional growth.
- Logistical barriers:
 - Overlapping sessions prevent students from attending multiple sections of interest.
 - Accessibility issues with the conference agenda app hinder use by individuals with poor vision.

Suggestions to increase access and improve experience

To address financial barriers:

- Increase travel grants, particularly for early-career graduate students.
- Host AAEA meetings in smaller cities: Consider hosting AAEA meetings in smaller cities with major airports to help reduce travel costs. Examples mentioned are Indianapolis, Detroit, Atlanta.
- Offer affordable lodging solutions: Coordinate blocks of hotel rooms in less expensive hotels near conference venues to cut down on accommodation expenses.
- Resource sharing platform: where students can connect to share resources and accommodation, thereby alleviating financial burdens.



APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Target Audience #3: Graduate Students

Suggestions to increase access and improve experience

To address social barriers:

- Networking and mentoring initiatives: Launch programs that promote networking and provide mentoring opportunities.
- Strengthen graduate connections: Facilitate stronger connections between graduate students through organized meetups and formal networks.
- Buddy system/ program: Establish a mentorship system where graduate students mentor each other, developing peer support. Also, consider implementing a buddy program that pairs experienced attendees with newcomers to provide guidance and facilitate smoother integration into the AAEA community.
- Ambassador role: Appoint ambassador students to assist, particularly those from minority groups and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), in navigating the AAEA environment.
- Support for newcomers: Provide specialized support and guidance for first-time attendees through dedicated networking rooms, mentoring programs, and tailored reunion events.
- Educational sessions: Offer sessions designed to help members understand how to navigate AAEA meetings, including explanations of session types, track sessions, and conference norms.
- Job market support: Increase support for job market candidates by having a panel session with CHAIRS and search committee members

To address logistical and accessibility challenges:

- Improve accessibility: Provide alternatives to smartphone apps for accessing conference information and ensure proper accommodations for individuals with disabilities.
- Improve communication: Improve the accessibility and clarity of communication, providing more detailed information about the AAEA, its sections, committees, and opportunities for involvement.
 - Website update: Regularly update the website to ensure that all information and guidelines for participation are current
 - Alternative information channels: Explore other methods besides emails for disseminating information, such as direct advisor-to-student communication channels.
 - Improve app features: Continue the use of the interactive map within the conference app to aid navigation.
- Educational materials: Develop welcome kits containing informative videos and PDF documents that explain the AAEA's structure, sections, and session types.
- Guidance on membership navigation: Offer clear guidance on how to navigate section memberships, including how to organize track sessions and use the listserv effectively.

APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Target Audience #4: Senior Members

Focus group participants noted at the outset that engagement from retired members in the profession is great, but should not be the top priority for AAEA.

Value of being a member of the AAEA

- Professional development opportunities:
- Varies depending on stage of career (e.g., Keynote speaker invitation)
- Annual Meeting:
 - Learn something new during the educational sessions on diverse topics
 - Opportunities to collaborate and network with professionals from all stages of career
 - Fun to see everyone and catch up and stay engaged in the broader community and profession
 - Serve as a mentor
 - Connect with Chairs/Department Heads Section
- Newsletter: read about what's happening
- Personal social interactions

Challenges and Barriers that prevent full participation in the AAEA Community

- Annual Meeting mobile app is less user-friendly than before.
- Difficulty traveling to certain meeting locations.
- Limited funding from departments or grants, usually none after retirement.
- University funding requirements, such as presenting a paper or serving in a larger role.
- High cost of registration and travel for the Annual Meeting.
 - Additional fees for spouses/significant others.
- Potential loss of institutional knowledge if senior members do not attend or participate.
- Overemphasis on agriculture and food, with applied economics often overlooked.
- Need for itemized registration fees or social passes for senior members.

APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Target Audience #4: Senior Members

Suggestions to increase access and improve experience

- Maintain regionally located meetings.
- Improve access to information and news from the association and professional bodies.
- Collaborate with the CHAIRS Section to engage retired faculty.
- Encourage retired faculty to teach classes, hold office hours, and participate in networking opportunities.
- Keep students involved, especially those transitioning to industry.
- Hold an Outlook forum or luncheon.
- Increase engagement with the agricultural business sector.
- Stay relevant and involved in the professional community.
- Offer lower registration and travel costs for seniors through mentorships, teaching, advising, and presentations.
- Recommend seniors for consulting positions.
- Address conflicts with summer activities and vacations.
- Establish an AAEA fund to bring in speakers.
- Identify and address competition from other professional societies.
- Offer more social functions during meetings, utilizing members' talents in music, public speaking, dance, and singing.