

More than 3,300 FFA members will descend on Lincoln in April for their annual convention, at a time when “agriculture is cool again,” as one agricultural educator put it.

The 83rd annual Nebraska FFA Convention will take place April 6-8, largely on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s East Campus and downtown at the Cornhusker Marriott and Pershing Auditorium.

High school students will participate in a variety of leadership, career and technical agriculture competitions, tour East Campus, meet faculty members and students and attend a career fair at Pershing Auditorium.

The annual FFA gathering “celebrates the changing nature of what agriculture is,” said Matt Kreifels, who splits his time between serving as state supervisor for agricultural education for the Nebraska Department of Education and an assistant professor of practice for UNL.

Tammy Meyer, executive director of the Nebraska FFA Foundation, added, “The reality is there are fewer and fewer students that come from production agriculture.”

The program has changed to adopt a more expansive view of what is defined as agriculture, including food science and safety, horticulture, small-animal veterinary science and more.

The program is really about preparing young people for their futures, whether in agriculture or another field, she added.

Past FFA members share that their FFA participation “gave them life skills—how to conduct a meeting, how to interact with people, how to work in a team,” Meyer said.

FFA is one piece of agricultural education. In-school education is another. Kreifels noted those programs actually are on the increase in Nebraska –nearing levels not seen since the 1950s.

“Agriculture is experiencing a renaissance right now,” Kreifels said. “Agriculture is one of the bright spots in today’s economy, and the message is getting across that agriculture is more than production. It’s about how to feed an expanding world population. We need the best and the brightest students to make that happen.”

“What’s the effect? Agriculture is cool again,” Kreifels added.

Kreifels said one key addition to this year’s convention is an Agricultural Issues Academy which will aim to help participants be effective spokespeople for agriculture. Among other activities, they’ll get a chance to meet with state legislators.

Additionally, FFA members will be seen throughout Lincoln as they participate in a “Day of Service.” During the Friday of the convention, students will participate in a clothing drive on UNL campuses, help at the People’s City Mission, and spend time with residents at the Tabitha Care Center.

Meyer noted that many ag-industry professionals will participate in the convention in various ways, through judging and working the career fair.

Career Development Events at the convention will include ag sales, agriscience, environment and natural resources, farm management, floriculture, food science, livestock management, livestock selection, marketing, meats evaluation and identification, nursery and landscape and welding.

Proficiency competitions cover 47 of agricultural production, business and management topics.

The convention will close with the election of the 2011-2012 Nebraska State FFA Officers, who will serve and represent Nebraska FFA over the next year.