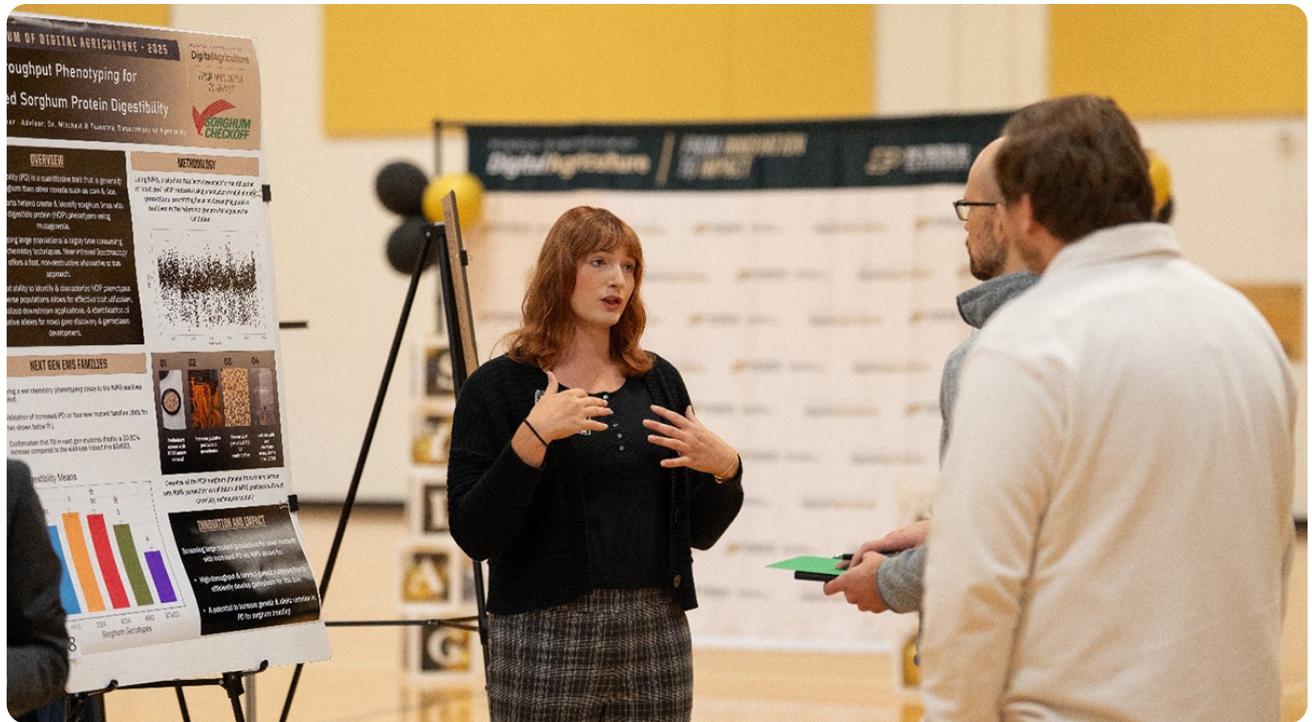# Secrets to a stellar symposium

What students learned from building one from scratch

By Chris Barron

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Graduate student Erin Widener presenting during the poster competition at the 2025 Symposium of Digital Agriculture at Purdue University.

This article explores how a group of students at Purdue University successfully organized the first Symposium of Digital Agriculture, offering a behind-the-scenes look at what it takes to build a symposium from the ground up. Through their experiences, it highlights key strategies, challenges, and lessons learned to help other students and academics create impactful, student-led events of their own.

Symposia are a common occurrence within academia that offer a smaller and more focused venue to learn about a particular topic compared to a conference. Due to their smaller size, symposia can reasonably be organized and hosted by smaller working groups that do not rely on the funding and breadth of a large national society needed to host a conference. Additionally, the more focused nature of a symposium allows organizers to target specific areas of a topic that are especially relevant or prescient. These aspects along with a lower bar to entry and local organization make symposia much more accessible to academics.

The only thing really needed to start a symposium is a group of dedicated and passionate individuals who are engaged and committed to creating a venue where their topic of interest can be discussed. However, starting from scratch is a difficult and daunting task; to better understand the work required to build symposium from scratch, I spoke with a group that did exactly that last year at Purdue University.

The 2025 Symposium of Digital Agriculture (SyDAg) was the first of its kind at Purdue University. This symposium, which included a hackathon and poster competition, attracted 140 attendees, distributed more than $5,000 in awards to students, and included exhibits and speakers from more than 10 industry and academic partners. While this event culminated in one day of presentations and sessions and a two-day hackathon, planning by the organizing committee began as far as a year prior.

I spoke with some of the members of this organizing committee: Leonardo Bosche, part of the logistics and operations team and the 2026 symposium chair; Gustavo Santiago, part of the hackathon team; Natalia Volpato, part of the marketing team; and Ignacio Ciampitti, one of the advising faculty. The goal of these conversations was to learn their inspiration for organizing this event, the challenges that they encountered along the way, the lessons they learned through the process, and why other students should consider hosting a symposium of their own.

*The 2025 SyDAg planning committee in tan polos. **Top, l to r:** Emmanuel Cooper, Harsh Pathak, Dr. Ankita Raturi, Natalia Volpato, Dr. Ignacio Ciampitti, Leonardo Bosche, Anna Mendes, Thirawat Bureetes, Leslie Aviles, Pedro Cisdeli, Gustavo Santiago. **Middle, l to r:** Megan Low, Ana Morales, Jeanine Arana, Mariela Fernandez, Wily Sic, Lian Duron, and Erick Oliva (Autumn Denny and Melinda Smith not pictured).*

Want to host a symposium? How to get started

 The first step to creating a symposium is to find a topic. The topic should be something that has broad interest so that it can attract a larger audience, but it must also be focused enough to achieve in-depth conversations in a single day of sessions.

For the SyDAg organizing committee, the theme focused on digital agriculture, emphasizing the transition from innovation to impact. The symposium explored how digital technologies intersect with agricultural systems across scales, from academia to industry to farmers, and how these innovations can be translated into real-world impact in the field.

The planning committee saw building momentum and energy for digital agriculture, supported by the Purdue University Institute for Digital and Advanced Agriculture Systems (IDAAS), and SyDAg could be an ideal venue to bring together a group of interdisciplinary students and professionals that are all working in and around this field.

 While the symposium took place in October 2025, the planning of it began a year in advance with the workload peaking two months prior to the event. Dr. Ciampitti recommends the planning of a symposium to begin at least nine months ahead, and for a new symposium, that should be increased to a year.

After assembling a team and deciding on a symposium topic, the focus shifts towards filling out a schedule and logistics. This includes setting out specific events such as talks and panel sessions, a poster competition, a hackathon, and networking activities. Additionally, the venue for the symposium must be selected with careful consideration to facilitate student and attendee participation.

After developing a layout of the event and where it might be held, speakers and sponsors for the event need to be identified. Finally, throughout this process, the symposium must also be publicized and marketed to encourage engagement and attendance from students and other professionals. All of this happens behind the scenes and well in advance of the ultimate event.

Students and professionals listen to a panel discussing the different implementations of digital agriculture.

Challenges and lessons learned

A recurring theme during our discussions was the challenges that the committee faced throughout the process, the greatest one being simply learning how to work together as a collaborative team. Leonardo emphasized that keeping the team productive and focused was a significant challenge, but the lessons learned about how to positively engage with different personalities were valuable.

Interacting with sponsors was a challenging yet highly rewarding process; the team learned how to effectively incorporate the sponsors' valuable input and ensure they felt the impact of their contributions all while maintaining the student-led vision of the symposium. Emphasizing this student-led focus also helps to encourage sponsorships and partnerships with companies who see this as a great soft skills development opportunity for the students on the organizing committee.

Another significant challenge for the organizing committee was promoting buy-in among students and ensuring that they actually show up on the day of the event. Natalia said that early on they saw that static marketing materials like posters or flyers didn't get much engagement from students, but that posting short simple videos of people talking about the symposium and the opportunities there instead got many more students to sign up.

Additionally, the marketing team had to consider how their materials could target students across multiple disciplines and not just those in their respective departments. Developing a website for the event was another challenging yet valuable task that offered a convenient place to direct people interested in the event and store registration and sign-up links. Moreover, while the website required a lot of work to initially create, it is now available to be reused for subsequent symposia.
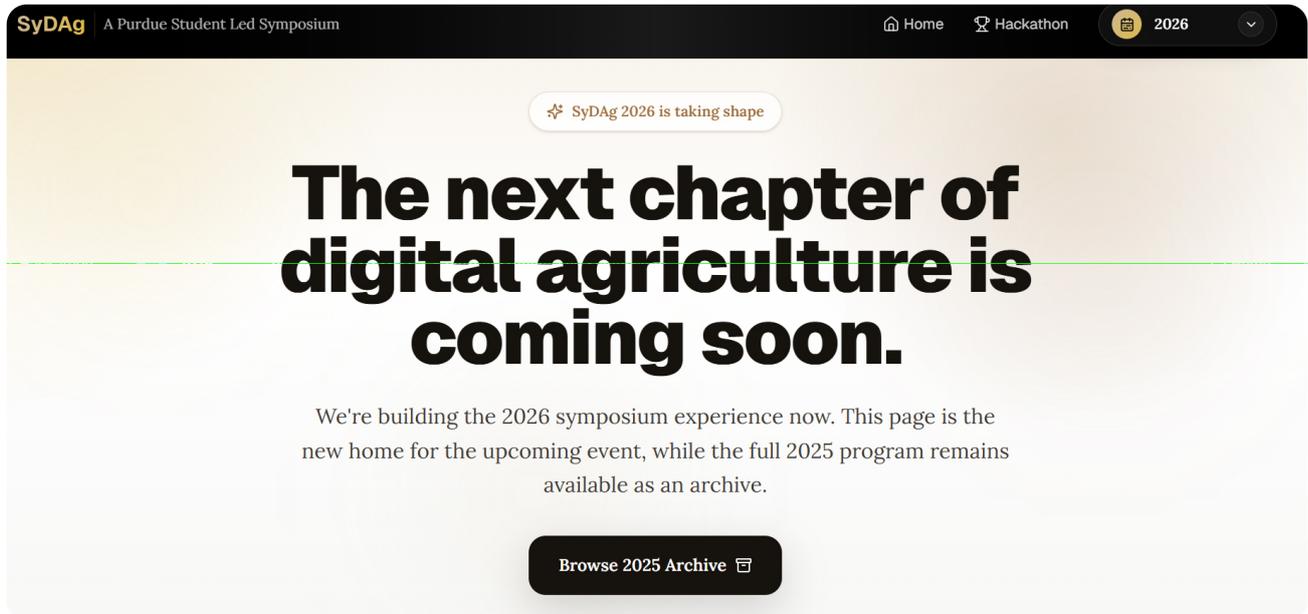
Screenshot of the website for the Symposium of Digital Agriculture (SyDAg).

Another easily forgotten challenge with marketing an official event is ensuring that the marketing materials meet the licensing and formatting requirements of the university. Working closely with the Agriculture Communications office from Purdue helped the SyDAg marketing team work through these regulations and develop professional and effective marketing materials.

The team also recommends sending out an additional RSVP a few weeks before the symposium that allows people to confirm their attendance. This helps to keep the symposium fresh in the mind of people who may have signed up months earlier and gives a better estimate of the true number of attendees on the day of the event, so the funding can be used more responsibly.

Some problems wait to appear until the day of the event, which was the case for the hackathon. Talking with Gustavo, I learned that some significant last-minute changes were made to the hackathon that gave a great deal of additional stress to the organizers. However, those complications ended up being a great opportunity for him to learn how to be flexible and solve problems quickly and creatively to adapt to the changing situation. Moreover, the hackathon team was able to learn from that experience and organize next year's hackathon with it in mind.

Finally, all this planning and work is done amidst normal student activities, increasing an already significant workload. Learning how to incorporate these new responsibilities was another hurdle that the members of the organizing committee had to adapt to. I think that Leonardo put it best when he said that you have to "just close your eyes and start doing the work".

Given the amazing amount of work and effort that culminates in just a single day of events, why should a person consider starting on this path? Planning a symposium is a unique and challenging experience that allows students to develop a valuable skill set that is otherwise difficult to attain during graduate school.

Looking ahead to SyDAg 2026

Looking ahead to SyDAg 2026, Leonardo says that the team is already far ahead of schedule compared with the previous year, largely thanks to the strong foundation established by the 2025 organizing committee that intentionally documented, organized, and annotated all of the work done the previous year. During the planning process, the team built up a repository of materials such as formalized speaker and sponsor requests that were difficult to make initially but now can easily be

repurposed for subsequent symposia.

Additionally, the team is able to leverage existing connections with the different organizations and offices that helped with planning the previous year. The committee is considering how they can drive more undergraduate student involvement and develop activities that have legitimate value for them. Additionally, the committee is planning to have a less dense event schedule to give more time for networking based on comments from last year. Most importantly, the planning committee is motivated by their success from the previous year and excited to continue refining and expanding this new valuable event.

Dr. Ciampitti felt that this experience also allows students to interact with people outside of their normal circles and gain a greater appreciation for how large the university is. From the students' perspectives, they saw a lot of the value from this experience in learning how to multitask and take on additional responsibilities and how to work collaboratively in a large interdisciplinary group. Working with professors at the university and the sponsors established strong connections that could be valuable in the future and gave opportunities for greater visibility.

Additionally, flexibility and resilience in problem solving were themes that repeatedly surfaced in our conversations. Finally, the ultimate reward comes at the end of all the work when the team is able to see the value of and engagement in their symposium.

Connecting with us

The article is a contribution from the ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Graduate Student Committee. If you would like to give us feedback on our work or want to volunteer to join the committee to help plan any of our activities, please email Bala Subramanyam Sivarathri at bs2441@msstate.edu (send message), the 2026 chair of the committee! If you would like to stay up to date with our committee, learn more about our work, contribute to one of our *CSA News* articles or suggest activities you would like us to promote, watch your emails, connect with us on X (Twitter), or view the committee page.

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