

Factors that Encouraged, Discouraged, and Would Encourage Students in Secondary Agricultural Education Programs to Join the FFA

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that encouraged, discouraged, and would encourage secondary agricultural education students to join the FFA. Also, one of the objectives was to describe the students demographically and determine if FFA members differed significantly from non-FFA members on selected demographic variables. A mail questionnaire was sent to a purposive sample of agricultural education departments in two states in each of the four FFA regions. All of the schools responded. The questionnaire was completed by 634 students with 53% of the sample from metropolitan schools and 47% from non-metropolitan schools. Exploratory factor analysis was used to identify factors and a bootstrapping procedure was used to determine if FFA members and non-FFA members differed significantly on the demographic variables. There were significantly more Asian, African American, and Hispanic students who were non-FFA members. There were significantly more freshmen who were non-FFA members and seniors who were FFA members. A significant number of non-FFA members responded that agriculture in the community was not important, slightly important, or didn't know. A significant number of FFA members indicated they had a high level of interest in agriculture while a significant number of non-FFA members indicated no or minimal interest in agriculture. Analysis of the demographic data revealed that the freshmen year is critical for recruiting students to join the FFA. For students that joined the FFA a three factor model explained approximately 57% of the variance with the personal development factor explaining the largest portion of the total variance. For students who did not join the FFA a four factor model explained approximately 60% of the variance with the negative image of the FFA factor explaining the largest portion of the total variance. For students who would consider joining the FFA a five factor model explained approximately 65% of the variance with two factors- knowledge of the FFA and image of the FFA - each explaining approximately 17% of the total variance. To encourage students to join the FFA the National FFA Organization needs to expand the FFA knowledge base at the secondary level, change the stereotypic image of the FFA, and attract a more diverse student population by showing how the FFA can positively affect a student's career choice even if that choice is minimally related to agriculture.

Introduction

One of the core goals of the FFA is to expand their customer base by expanding FFA membership that is representative of the student body (FFA website). In August 1996, the National FFA Organization set a recruitment goal to grow the national membership by 66 percent to 750, 000

members nationwide by 2002 (National FFA Organization, 1996, p. 1). In 1995 the National FFA Organization estimated there were approximately 600,000 secondary agricultural education students of which 430,000 joined the FFA and the remaining 170,000 were not members of the FFA. From the 1993 State Annual Reports supplied to the National FFA Organization, membership as a percent of enrollment in agricultural education in the four regions was as follows: Central 81%, Eastern 69%, Western 75%, and Southern 63%. In order to achieve its recruitment goal the National FFA Organization needs to be aware of what factors influence a student to join the FFA, what factors discouraged a student from joining the FFA, and what factors would encourage a student to join the FFA.

Theoretical Framework

FFA as a Youth Organization

The National FFA Organization's mission is "dedicated to making a positive difference in the lives of young people by developing their potential for premier leadership, personal growth, and career success through agricultural education" (National FFA website). Generally, the FFA provides leadership opportunities for students enrolled in an agricultural education program and is dedicated to the leadership development of its members. Youth organizations like the FFA have been "extremely popular with both secondary and post secondary vocational education over the years" (Lankard, 1996). Many youth organizations such as Boys and Girls Clubs and Girls Incorporated provide youth development experiences which are aimed at providing a healthy transition from adolescence to adulthood (Gambone & Arbreton, 1997). The researchers drew upon theories and research in adolescent development to define the following seven developmental measures: safety, challenging and interesting activities, a sense of belonging, supportive relationships with adults, leadership, input and decision-making, and community service. The researchers discovered that youth who experienced some or all of the seven measures are more likely to have a productive adolescence and will ultimately mature into responsible adults. Lynch, et al. (1994) identified the following components of a high quality vocational education: innovative and flexible teachers, meaningful partnerships with business and industry, supportive administrators, technologically current equipment and supplies, and strong vocational student organizations.

The FFA espouses the notion that it can be of service in helping a student prepare for a career whether it is in agriculture or not. Bakar and McCracken (1994) reported a relationship between a student's career maturity, which was defined as "the individuals readiness to make educational and career decisions that are expected of them" (p. 1), and participation in the FFA. In this study FFA membership benefitted the student's career development. Many studies have found a relationship between participation in youth organization leadership activities and leadership life skills development (Dormoody & Seevers, 1994; Wingenback & Kahler, 1997). However, are leadership opportunities the main reason why students join the FFA? Hall (1993) asked adult postsecondary members why they joined the Vocational Industrial Clubs of America (VICA) and almost all responded they thought being a club member would help them develop competencies necessary for employment.

While the FFA is concerned about growing its membership, two VICA clubs - Technology Student Association and Health Occupations Students of America, have increased their membership mainly because they have included current career opportunities such as, technical preparation and applied academics into their organization (Hannah, 1993).

Reasons for Joining the FFA

There are many reasons why students decide to join youth organizations. Turner and Herren (1997) discovered that FFA members had a higher need for achievement, affiliation, and power than non-FFA members. Marshall, Herring, and Briers (1990) reported that students joined the FFA mainly because it enhanced their personal identity and to a lesser degree to become involved in activities. Connors, Moore, and Elliot (1990) found a student's interest in learning about agriculture even if they did not want to join the FFA as the most influential factor. For minority students researchers found that students joined youth organizations because of the positive experiences, educational activities, and opportunities for personal development (Cano & Bankston, 1992) as well as for personal and social benefits (Morris & Co., 1992).

Barriers to Joining the FFA

Not all agricultural education students join the FFA. Hoover and Scanlon (1991) found that overall the image of agricultural education, the FFA, and the agriculture profession in general was the main reason why students did not enroll in agricultural education and join the FFA. Pursuing the student's reasoning further the researchers reported that students perceived agricultural education and the FFA as being for rural males, saw no future value in taking agricultural education courses, and were persuaded by significant others not to enroll in agricultural education and not to join the FFA. Connors, Moore, and Elliot (1990) reported that students did not join the FFA because of a low level of interest in agriculture and they perceived little future value of the FFA to their career. Cano and Bankston (1992) conducted focus groups with minority youth in 4-H and found a lack of finances and minority role models were barriers to their involvement in 4-H.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that encouraged, discouraged, and would encourage secondary agricultural education students to join the FFA.

Objectives

1. To describe the students demographically
2. To identify factors that encouraged students to become members of the FFA
3. To identify factors that discouraged students from becoming members of the FFA
4. To identify factors that would encourage students to become members of the FFA

Methodology

Subject Selection

Questionnaires were sent to a purposive sample of agricultural education programs throughout the United States in October 1995. The National FFA Organization identified those states with the highest percentage of non-members based upon FFA membership as a percent of agricultural education enrollment as reported to the National FFA through the 1993 State Annual Report. The states were divided into the four FFA regions (Central, Western, Eastern, and Southern), and the two states having the lowest percentage of FFA membership in each of four regions were selected. Those states were the following: Georgia (51.4%), Florida (55.2%), Virginia (39.8%), Wisconsin (69.3%), Washington (37.9%), Idaho (52.6%), Delaware (37.9%), and Michigan (67.7%). The state FFA executive secretary from each state was asked to nominate one rural (non-metropolitan, # 20,000 county population) and one urban (metropolitan, >20,000 county population) school with a high percentage of non-members based on agricultural education enrollment data.

Teachers in each of the 16 selected schools agreed to participate in the study. Each teacher was sent questionnaires and administered them to their students who were in attendance on that day. The data were collected during October and November 1995.

Description of the Sample

The questionnaire was completed by 634 students. Fifty-three percent of the sample were from metropolitan schools, while 47% were from non-metropolitan schools. The following are the states that participated in the study with the number of students that responded to the questionnaire and the percentage related to the total sample: Delaware 145 (23%), Florida 83 (13%), Georgia 49 (8%), Idaho 103 (16%), Michigan 34 (6%), Virginia 76 (12%), Washington 72 (11%), and Wisconsin 72 (11%).

Instrument Development

The questionnaire was based upon factors identified in the review of literature and from interviews conducted with a previous national FFA officer, former agricultural education instructors, and teacher educators. A panel of nine experts reviewed the questionnaire for face and content validity. The panel consisted of teacher educators, an FFA executive secretary, a national FFA officer, high school agriculture instructors, and a 4-H administrator. The questionnaire was field tested and pilot tested in September and October 1995. Students' attitudes were assessed by three sets of items using a four-point Likert-type scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Test-retest procedures were utilized during the pilot test to calculate reliability over a two week period and a 61% agreement on a set of 32 items which influenced students not to join the FFA was obtained. A 68% agreement was achieved on a set of 20 items which would influence students to join the FFA. A 71% agreement was achieved on a set of 18 items why students joined the FFA. Ex post facto internal consistency

reliability was computed using Cronbach's alpha which was .95, .92, and .88 respectively on the three sets of items.

Data Analysis

Frequencies were computed for selected demographic nominal variables for FFA members and non FFA members using SPSS version 10.0.5. Resampling Stats, version 5.0.2, which is a computer program utilizing bootstrapping procedures was used to determine if differences existed between FFA members and non FFA members on these demographic variables. Bootstrapping procedures were used due to the fact that random sampling was not used in selecting the sample and thus the assumptions for conventional statistics could not be met. Bootstrapping allows one to use the data available and through simulation to determine exact probabilities without having to meet the assumptions needed with conventional statistical procedures.

Exploratory factor analysis using principal component extraction procedures in SPSS was used to identify the following factors: (a) factors that encouraged FFA membership, (b) factors that discouraged FFA membership, and (c) factors that would encourage FFA membership. Factor analysis provided a parsimonious number of factors which could be used to represent relationships among sets of many interrelated variables. Based upon the correlation matrix, Bartlett's test of sphericity, and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measuring of sampling adequacy, the data were considered appropriate for factor analysis.

Two criteria were used to determine the number of factors to be extracted. First, only factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 were considered in the analysis. Second, a scree plot of the factor eigenvalues was used to identify breaks or discontinuity in determining the number of factors. The factors were rotated using a varimax rotation method with Kaiser Normalization to aid in the interpretation of the factors. The factors resulting from such a rotation are orthogonal to each other. Based upon an alpha level of .01, Stevens (1992) suggests using loadings of .40 absolute when determining which items are significant in loading on a factor since there is considerable opportunity for capitalization on chance.

Results

Selected demographic data for FFA members and non-FFA members in the sample are reported in Table 1. Using the bootstrap procedure, significant differences were found between FFA members and non-FFA members at the .05 alpha level in the following characteristics: ethnic background, class rank, year first enrolled in agricultural education, importance of agriculture in the community, and level of interest in agriculture.

There were significantly more Asians, African Americans, and Hispanics who were non-FFA members than were FFA members. There were significantly more freshmen who were non-FFA members than were FFA members. There were significantly more seniors who were FFA members than were non-FFA members. For the year the student was first enrolled in agricultural education there were significantly more sophomores, juniors, and seniors who were non-FFA members than there were

FFA members. When the first year of enrollment in agricultural education was during their freshmen year, there was an even split between FFA members and non-FFA members. On the importance of agriculture in the community significant differences were found between FFA members and non-FFA members. There were significantly more non-FFA members who responded that agriculture in the community was not important, slightly important, and did not know than those students who were FFA members. On the level of interest in agriculture significant differences were found between FFA members and non-FFA members. More non-FFA members responded that they had no interest or minimal interest in agriculture while significantly more FFA members responded they had a high interest in agriculture.

Table 2 reports the factor loadings for those students who did not join the FFA. A four factor model explained approximately 60% of the variance. The researchers named all of the factors in this study. The first factor was labeled “negative image of the FFA” and included items such as “the FFA is for low ability students; the guidance counselor encouraged me not to join.” The second factor was labeled “values conflict” where the student’s values were not in line with what they perceived the values of the FFA were. This factor included items such as “my contributions would not be valued.” The third factor was labeled “time conflict” and most of the items were in reference to students’ after school jobs and activities. The fourth factor was labeled “lack of peer involvement.”

Table 3 reports the factor loadings for those students who joined the FFA. A three factor model explained approximately 57% of the variance. The first factor was labeled personal development and included items such as “the FFA helps me prepare for the future; the FFA helps me improve my leadership activities.” The second factor was labeled “positive image of the FFA” and included items such as “the FFA chapter has a good image; the FFA is fun.” The third factor was labeled “former family FFA members.”

Table 4 reports factor loadings for students who were not FFA members but would consider joining the FFA if certain incentives were in place. For this group a five factor model explained approximately 65% of the variance. The first factor was labeled “knowledge of the FFA” and included items such as “I would join the FFA if the experience got me a good job; I would join the FFA if FFA activities were during class time.” The second factor was labeled “image of the FFA” and included items such as “I would join the FFA if less emphasis was placed on farming; if the FFA was more important than my current activities.” The third factor was labeled “teacher encouragement.” The fourth factor was labeled “lack of time” which included items such as “more FFA activities during class time; conflicts with work after school.” The fifth factor was labeled “interest in agriculture as a career.”

Table 1. Student Demographic Summary

Characteristics	FFA Member		Non FFA Member	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Gender				
Male	175	47	198	53
Female	111	47	125	53
Ethnic Background				
Asian*	0	0	12	100
African American*	17	35	32	65
Hispanic*	6	25	18	75
Native American	8	50	8	50
White (Caucasian)	246	50	245	50
Other	7	54	6	46
Class Rank				
9 th Grade*	59	35	110	65
10 th Grade	71	49	74	51
11 th Grade	71	44	92	56
12 th Grade*	71	59	49	41
Part-time Work				
No	78	43	105	57
Yes	207	49	218	51
Year first enrolled in Agricultural Education				
9 th Grade	169	50	166	50
10 th Grade*	41	40	62	60
11 th Grade*	38	37	64	63
12 th Grade*	13	35	24	65
Importance of agriculture in the community				
Not Important*	12	32	25	68
Slightly Important*	20	41	29	59
Moderately Important	97	55	79	45
Very Important	132	54	113	46
Don't Know*	23	24	75	76
Level of interest in agriculture				
No Interest*	19	20	77	80
Minimal Interest*	42	30	100	70
Moderate Interest	111	52	102	48
High Interest*	112	73	42	27

*p< = .05

Table 2. Rotated Factor Matrix of Factors which Discouraged FFA Membership using Varimax Rotation with Kaiser Normalization (n=154)

Items which Discouraged FFA Membership	Factors			
	1	2	3	4
I have not joined the FFA because ...				
the guidance counselor encouraged me not to join	.81			
FFA is only for lower ability students	.80			
I did not feel welcomed by the advisor	.80			
FFA is only for higher ability students	.77			
I have a negative image of agriculture	.73			
FFA is not for minority students	.72			
the instructor is not supportive of the FFA	.72			
FFA is for rural students only	.69			
my parents are not supportive of the FFA	.65			
I did not feel welcomed by FFA members	.64			
I have a negative image of FFA	.64			
the local FFA chapter is not very good	.63		.53	
I have never been asked to join FFA	.61			
the dues are too high	.56			
there are not enough opportunities for me in FFA	.55	.55		
I have a personality conflict with the FFA advisor	.53			
FFA meeting are held at a bad time	.47		.47	.41
FFA does not improve my popularity	.45			
there are too many requirements for FFA participation	.44			.40
there is no future value in FFA for me		.83		
there is no present value in FFA for me		.77		
I am not interested in agriculture as a career		.72		
there are no role models for me in FFA		.71		
I have more important things to do with my time		.65		
my contribution would not be valued	.40	.56		
I have a conflict with other school activities			.76	
FFA activities are not held during school hours			.70	
I need to work after school			.46	
few, if any, friends are in FFA				.76
I have no time for FFA events		.42		.59
I have no transportation to FFA events				.54
I don't know about FFA	.47			.51
Eigenvalue	9.1	4.7	2.9	2.7
Percent Total Variance	28.3	14.6	9.1	8.4

Table 3. Rotated Factor Matrix of Factors which Encouraged FFA Membership using Varimax Rotation with Kaiser Normalization (n=154)

Items which Encouraged FFA Membership	Factors		
	1	2	3
I have joined the FFA because ...			
FFA enhances my personal development	.84		
FFA helps me prepare for the future	.83		
FFA will improve my leadership abilities	.83		
there are role models for me in the FFA	.74		
I have opportunities for awards	.72		
I enjoy FFA competition	.71		
I am interested in agriculture as a career	.60		
my agriculture instructor motivated me to join	.50		
our chapter has many members		.82	
the FFA chapter has a good image		.70	
FFA is fun	.54	.60	
I have few transportation limits to FFA events		.59	
I like to take part in school activities	.41	.54	
many of my friends are in FFA		.52	
I can pay FFA-related costs	.46	.48	
my parents were involved in FFA			.77
my brothers and sisters were FFA members			.75
I had no choice, FFA is part of agricultural education			.68
Eigenvalue	5.2	3.1	2.0
Percent Total Variance	28.7	17.33	10.8

Table 4. Rotated Factor Matrix of Factors which would Encourage FFA Membership using Varimax Rotation with Kaiser Normalization (n=264)

Items which Would Encourage FFA Membership	Factors				
	1	2	3	4	5
I would join the FFA if ...					
my ideas were welcomed and valued by the group	.80				
I had more knowledge about the FFA	.75				
more leadership opportunities were offered	.66	.45			
FFA experience got me a good job	.58				
more FFA activities were during class time	.45			.44	
I had a different FFA advisor	.44				
there were less emphasis on farming		.84			
there were more role models in FFA		.70			
FFA was more important than my current activities		.65			
FFA dues were lower		.62			
the chapter paid my FFA dues	.54	.56			
my parents encouraged me to join		.43	.43		
my band/music/drama teacher encouraged me to join			.88		
my athletic coach encouraged me to join			.82		
FFA had a better image			.52		.43
I had more time				.80	
I didn't have to work after school				.76	
I had more friends in the FFA				.55	.54
I were interested in agriculture as a career					.79
more interesting FFA activities were conducted		.41			.42
Eigenvalue	3.4	3.3	2.6	2.1	1.7
Percent Total Variance	16.7	16.7	12.9	10.6	8.5

Conclusions and Recommendations

The demographic data for the students in this study revealed that the freshmen year is critical for recruitment purposes for the FFA since the largest number of students enroll in agricultural education as a freshmen. The data collection for this study occurred in October and November which is the beginning of the school year so it could be that the benefits of FFA membership had not yet been promoted to the students which may be why the majority of freshmen on the class rank variable (65%) were non-FFA members. For students whose first year of enrollment in agricultural education is not as a freshman these students tend not to join the FFA. These students may be in a specialized program such as, horticulture or agricultural mechanics and they have less interest in taking advantage of the FFA's activities such as, leadership development. A significant number of non-FFA members rated

the importance of agriculture in the community as not important or slightly important. Possibly, these students did not realize how agriculture directly or indirectly affects their lives and their community. It is interesting to note that a significant number of non-FFA members responded they did not know the importance of agriculture in their community. The reader needs to be reminded that the students in this study were in agricultural education programs so one would assume they would have some knowledge about the importance of agriculture in the community. This finding may signify a lack of knowledge about the indirect impact of agriculture. Non-FFA members had no interest or minimal interest in agriculture while FFA members had a high interest in agriculture. It is not surprising to note that since non-FFA members did not even know about the importance of agriculture in the community that their level of interest in agriculture is minimal at best. Perhaps some basic information and education about agriculture in general as well as related fields such as processing, marketing, business, economics, and education may increase their level of interest in agriculture. Too much emphasis on production agriculture is not doing justice to the numerous opportunities agriculture offers to all students.

For students that joined the FFA they perceived personal development opportunities as the most motivating factor followed by a positive image of the FFA and by family members who were former members of the FFA. These findings for students who joined the FFA supports the research by Turner and Herren (1997), Marshall, Herring, and Briers (1990), and Connors, Moore, and Elliot (1990). The image the FFA is trying to convey is reaching these students but these students probably enjoy competition, are interested in agriculture as a career, and were encouraged by family members to join the FFA. For students who did not join the FFA the negative image of the FFA was the most powerful factor and contained items such as “guidance counselor encouraged me not to join the FFA; the FFA is for low ability students.” Interestingly, this group of students perceived that the FFA was not for minority students, did not feel welcome by FFA members, and did not see any future value in the FFA. These findings support the research by Hoover and Scanlon (1991) and Connors, Moore and Elliot (1990). For students who were not FFA members but would consider joining the FFA they lacked knowledge about the FFA, felt there should be less emphasis placed on farming, and wanted to relate FFA experiences with getting a good job. These findings support the research by Hannah (1993) which emphasized that youth organizations must change as the needs of its students change.

To encourage students to join the FFA agricultural education teachers should educate the school’s guidance counselors, other teachers, and students in general about the positive aspects of the FFA and begin to change their mind set that the FFA is for low ability, rural students. The negative image the FFA has among some students in this study suggests that the image problem needs to be addressed not only at the local level but statewide and nationally. The negative image that some students had that the FFA is not for minority students and there are few role models in FFA for them indicates that the FFA should try to recruit minority students by showing and encouraging more diversity in its membership and allowing those students to tell others what the FFA has done for them developmentally and what skills they have acquired which can apply towards a future occupation. The days when the FFA stood primarily for white, rural, male youths focused upon farming as a career needs to change to attract a new, diverse student population who may consider agriculture as a career if the stereotypic images are replaced with FFA experiences which can help a student attain job opportunities in business, agriscience, technology, and other related fields. To attract this new group of

students the National FFA Organization as well as agricultural education teachers need to be aware that this group of students may not have need for achievement, affiliation, and power that traditional FFA members have so different recruitment strategies are necessary such as focusing upon how the FFA can help them secure a good job. This group needs basic knowledge not only about the FFA but about the many job opportunities available in agriculture. This study also found that students don't have as much free time after school so FFA activities should be a part of class time to encourage students to participate which may lead them to join the organization. In order for the National FFA Organization to reach one of its core goals of "expanding our customer base by expanding FFA membership that is representative of the student population" they need to work on expanding the knowledge base about the FFA at the secondary level, work on changing the image of the FFA at the local, national, and state levels, and actively recruit a more diverse student population by updating how the FFA can positively affect a student's career choice even if that career is minimally related to agriculture such as communications, education, or technology.

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Factors that Encourage, Discouraged, and Would Encourage Students in Secondary Agricultural Education Programs to Join the FFA

A Critique

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The authors have selected and developed a timely research study of importance to agricultural educators and vocational and technical educators, nationwide. For those agricultural educators who have experienced success as FFA members, FFA chapter advisors, or in other capacities associated with the FFA, it seems enigmatic that many of today's secondary agricultural education students complete their schooling without becoming FFA members. The researchers are to be commended for investigating why this problem of missed educational opportunity for thousands of high school youths persists across the nation. Factor analysis was used very effectively in this study to gain considerable insight into understanding this problem.

This paper provides a comprehensive, yet concise, theoretical framework for the study reported. Both purpose and objectives are equally concise, but sharply focused. Although the population was not specifically stated, one could presume that it included all secondary students enrolled in agricultural education during fall semester of 1995. The researchers followed a rather ingenious purposive sampling plan in selecting their survey participants. They selected two schools (one rural, one urban) in each of two states with the lowest percentage of FFA membership in each of the four national FFA regions--for a total of 16 high schools with agricultural education programs. The survey instrument was adequately developed, validated, and field tested. After the data collection, a rather complex, but appropriate, factor analysis process was used to determine exact probabilities of the variables involved. The tabular findings were clearly presented; however, the paper, itself, would benefit from some careful editing.

The conclusions and recommendations seemed fully supported by the findings and should be a fine context for questions and discussion. If the freshman year is critical for FFA recruitment purposes, how can school systems with block schedules, area occupational school programs (where students attend half or alternate day classes, etc.), and other non-traditional arrangements for agricultural education encourage students to join FFA? How can students enrolled in specialized agricultural education programs, such as horticulture or agricultural mechanics, be motivated to become FFA members? What can agricultural educators do to provide a curriculum that teaches early on the importance of agriculture in local communities and to the everyday lives of students? Also, that teaches the importance of FFA for developing personal leadership qualities and gaining employment? How can the FFA show and encourage more diversity in its membership so minority students feel more welcome to join? How can FFA activities be scheduled to accommodate students who have after school-day commitments (jobs, family responsibilities, etc.)? This is an excellent study--one which has high utility for agricultural educators.