Assessing the Overall Ethical Condition of the Competitive FFA Program as Perceived by Pre-Service Agricultural Science Teachers

Jon A. Hogg, Texas Tech University
Lance Kieth, West Texas A&M University
Matt Baker, Texas Tech University
Jacqui Lockaby, Texas Tech University
Steve Fraze, Texas Tech University

Abstract

The major responsibility of FFA is education; however, the focus of competition has recently become very important to society. There is a tremendous advantage associated with competition when it results in the acquisition of knowledge and negative when it detracts from learning (Billings, 1980). The effect of competition on youth and the unethical practices involved with competitive events have become very controversial. Recent studies have shown both positive and negative effects of competition on children; however, there does not appear to be a significant amount of research regarding ethical and unethical practices in FFA competitive events based on the perceptions of pre-service agricultural science teachers.

The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of pre-service agricultural science teachers concerning competitive FFA events. The purpose accomplished by examining three open-ended questions. This study was the result of a larger study where data were collected using a questionnaire. The following results were found: (1) respondents perceived leadership, teamwork, character skills, responsibility, and life skills to be benefits of competitive FFA activities; (2) respondents indicated the need for more positive publicity and public education, the need to monitor the activities more closely, and the need to focus more on learning from the events to improve bad perceptions; and (3) almost one-fourth of the total group found no concerns with the overall ethical condition of the competitive FFA program; however, others thought competition overshadowed other programs, advisors were bad examples, and a win-at-all-cost attitude existed.
Theoretical Framework

As we enter a new millennium, many competitive youth programs are focusing on the effectiveness of their program. A continued focus on the perceived rapid moral decline of today’s youth has forced these organizations to reevaluate the effectiveness of their program, as well as become more accountable for meeting their goals. A focus on ethics and moral education today, will assure society of a more productive, value-laden member tomorrow.

According to Dr. Benjamin Spock, “this century has seen a progressive relaxation of many of our standards of behavior and the souring of many commonly held beliefs. Taken one by one, most are of little importance. Taken together, I believe they show that we have lost our way” (Eberly, 1995, p. 3). In a recent poll of American adults, conducted by The Wall Street Journal (1995), “moral decline” was stated to be the biggest problem that America will face in the next twenty years. In a survey conducted by Who’s Who Among American High School Students (Kleiner & Lord, 1999), 80% of high school students that were considered “high-achievers” admitted to cheating at least once. Over one-half of those students said that cheating was not necessarily wrong.

Rokeach (1973) defined values as enduring beliefs that guide behavior in daily situations and are preferred personally or socially to an opposite value. However, Hague (1993) believes values are more than just beliefs. “A value is not just a belief, it is a conception of the desirable leading to the selection of various modes, means, and ends of action” (p. 36). In a world as complex as the one we live in today morals, values, and ethics are very important. Licona (1991) observed that many children lacked the lessons teaching fairness, trustworthiness, caring, citizenship, respect, and responsibility, traditionally taught in American homes, churches, temples, and schools. Positive values now must be taught outside the home. Families, schools, and the mass media have the greatest influence on youth development; however, other institutions must also contribute. Collaborative efforts must be made from everyone to teach values at home, school, church, and within organizations. Several activities that provide the greatest opportunities for moral education are sports, extra curricular activities, and youth organizations. In the United States, there are many clubs, organizations, and associations that provide opportunities to receive recognition and to interact with peers. In agricultural education, FFA encourages moral development in today’s youth.

Leadership development has become the backbone of FFA. Competitive developmental activities, such as chapter conducting, creed speaking, livestock judging, and land judging are held on the national level of the FFA. These events, known as Career Development Events (CDE), are competitive events that develop technical knowledge, judgment, reasoning, and sportsmanship. Also, each student is responsible for planning a project, generally referred to as “home projects” or Supervised Agricultural Experience programs (SAE). These projects usually take the form of a production enterprise such as livestock or crop production and provide opportunities for students to develop skills and knowledge along with providing a basis for classroom instruction (The National Council for Agricultural Education, 1992).

Trends have shown an increase in moral education in the classroom. Opportunities are available for agricultural educators to take responsibility of the character of its youth. Whaley and Kokes (1995) found that agricultural instructors agree that integrity should be taught. Students should be taught how to cope with defeat and how to handle victory. Agriscience teachers must be leaders in ethical behavior, not only for themselves but for the total agricultural industry (Campbell, 1995). Agricultural education can make a significant contribution to the
education and development of the student as a person and productive member of society (Phipps & Osborne, 1988). Agricultural education provides opportunities to develop ethical character and desirable citizenship. Several activities such as SAE programs aid in developing values and ethics in students. Students also learn by observation through the pattern set by the teacher who spends considerable time with the students in many activities.

In support of value education, recent studies have revealed that teenagers who participate in FFA activities and agricultural education are more likely to develop life skills in leadership, personal development, and citizenship. One study by Lockaby (1997) surveyed 200 agricultural educators to determine their perceptions of what values should be taught in agricultural education. As a group, agriculture teachers in the U.S. agree that courtesy, respect, honesty, truth, responsibility, kindness, caring, honor, self-respect, cooperation, prudence, tolerance, trust, perseverance, friendliness, loyalty, diligence, commitment, generosity, service, and freedom should be taught to young people studying high school agriculture. Agricultural teachers perceived the most appropriate component for teaching these values was the FFA organization. Youth can be led into the future by active participation in agricultural education and FFA.

Studies have reflected that FFA does influence students currently enrolled in agricultural education. According to Lockaby (1997), the FFA and its related activities should continue to serve as a vehicle for value education. She concluded by stating, “Educational leaders need to be made aware of the opportunities the FFA makes available for character development as it is an integral part of the instructional program in agriculture” (p. 132).

Ricketts and Newcomb (1984) found a significant difference in the leadership and personal development skills between students active in FFA and those that were not. Leadership and personal development are two of the major benefits gained by the student, relative to the level of activity in the FFA. Likewise, citizenship, cooperation, responsibility, and confidence are enhanced through participation in the FFA.

Unfortunately, competitive events have received negative publicity in the past. Recent studies, such as the one by Kieth (1997), have found dishonesty and unethical practices to be observed in competitive events. He found the most common problem with competitive events, as perceived by the parents, was excessive parental involvement, followed closely by unethical practices. Kieth and Vaughn (1999) also found that parents identified unethical practices as one of the most common problems with competitive events.

Research has found that these concerns have merit. A study conducted by Murphy, Norwood, and Dubes (1995) found that 25% of participants in the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo admitted to knowingly using illegal drugs on their show animals. In 1991, seven animals auctioned at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo were disqualified due to the animals testing positive for illegal drugs. Other examples include falsifying birth dates on breeding animals and using professional custom fitters.

The major responsibility of FFA is education; however, the focus of competition has recently become very important to society. There is a tremendous advantage associated with competition when it results in the acquisition of knowledge and negative when it detracts from learning (Billings, 1980). The effect of competition on youth and the unethical practices involved with competitive events have become very controversial. Recent studies have shown both positive and negative effects of competition on children.

Competition is a natural phenomenon that is a part of our every day life (Hale, 1993). Today’s youth participate in numerous competitive activities. These activities can be beneficial to the development of youth for a productive life. Competition can be valuable to the
development of youth because as Epstein and Harackiewicz (1992) suggest, it may externally control an individual’s behavior, and when they win, they feel more competent and develop more of a concern about doing well. There is a tremendous advantage associated with competition when it results in the acquisition of knowledge, and negative when it detracts from learning (Billings, 1980).

Supporters hope the benefits of the National FFA program are greater than the negatives; however, the perception of these programs by those actively involved and those not involved with FFA will be of major importance to its future success. Unfortunately, the perception of wrongdoing seems to follow those who achieve continuous success. This suspicion of wrongdoing is very damaging to the FFA program and its intended purpose. What has caused these perceptions? What can be done to change these perceptions? What precautions or additional educational programs are needed to curb this kind of behavior? Perhaps pre-service agricultural science teachers can help answer these questions.

**Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of pre-service agricultural science teachers concerning competitive FFA events. As a means of accomplishing the purpose, the following objectives were developed:

1. Identify the benefits of competitive FFA activities as perceived by pre-service agricultural science teachers, as expressed through open-ended comments.

2. Identify methods to improve negative perceptions regarding competitive FFA activities as perceived by pre-service agricultural science teachers, as expressed through open-ended comments.

3. Identify concerns with the overall ethical condition of FFA as perceived by pre-service agricultural science teachers, as expressed through open-ended comments.

**Methodology**

**Population/Study Design**

The target population for this study consisted of pre-service agricultural science teachers currently doing their student teaching. The subjects of this study were selected using stratified random selection to assure equal representation from each of the four regions identified by Camp (2000). Each region was represented in proportion to the number of student teachers graduating from each institution in the four regions during 1998. The population consisted of 84 universities representing the four defined regions. Procedures for subject selection were followed using the Table for Determining Sample Size for a Given Population (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). A formula was used to select proportionally by region. Selection of pre-service agricultural science teachers was done proportionally by region as follows: Southern (n=140), Eastern (n=26), Western (n=59), and Central (n=98).

**Data Collection/Analysis**
As a part of a larger study, data for this study was collected by a mailed questionnaire to the randomly selected institutions. The questionnaire was initially developed in a previous study and used with the permission of Mounce and Terry (2001). Prior to using the instrument, additional questions were created by the researchers and departmental faculty. Guidelines of Dillman’s (2000) Total Design Method (TDM) were followed to increase response rate. Of the 323 reported pre-service agricultural science teachers, a total of 263 completed surveys were received yielding an 81% response rate.

**Instrumentation**

The instrument designed for this study was a four-part mailed questionnaire. Part one contained three open-ended questions. These questions were placed at the beginning of the instrument to eliminate bias from the other sections of the instrument. For this current study, only information from part one was analyzed. Three other sections were included in the instrument for a larger study. Part two determined perceptions regarding the overall ethical condition of FFA using a five-point Likert type-scale. Part three contained 16 statements with two questions each. The first question was a “Yes” “No” question designed to determine awareness or knowledge of the practice. Question two used a four-point Likert-type scale to determine perceptions of the commonality of each practice. The final section was developed to collect selected demographic data.

To assure the researchers of a quality instrument, the questionnaire was assessed for face and content validity by a panel of experts. The goal of this analysis was to assess construct validity, reliability, and dimensionality, leading to the development of an instrument that would more accurately measure the overall ethical condition of agricultural youth programs.

**Findings**

In an effort to better understand the perceptions of pre-service agricultural science teachers, the respondents were asked to respond to three open ended questions pertaining to: (1) the benefits of competitive FFA activities; (2) how to improve competitive FFA activities; and (3) concerns for FFA activities. These questions were placed at the beginning of the instrument in an effort to receive unbiased feedback from the respondents before they were influenced by the questionnaire. These questions further permitted the assessment of the FFA program. These comments were grouped and reported by objective.

**Objective One**

Respondents were asked to list what they believed were the benefits of competitive FFA activities. These statements were recorded and labeled by the researcher for further evaluation (Table 1).

The most frequently listed benefit of competitive FFA activities was leadership. Over one-third of pre-service agricultural science teachers (38.3%) listed leadership as a benefit of competitive FFA activities. Pre-service agricultural science teachers (34.5%) also perceived teamwork to be a benefit that resulted from competitive FFA activities. A total of 54 pre-service agricultural science teachers (20.7%) perceived that those involved in FFA received character skills and responsibility. Other benefits listed by respondents included life skills; self-esteem; networking; solidify classroom instruction; communication skills; recognition; competitive drive;
critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making skills; hard work; and learning to win and lose.
Table 1. Respondents’ perceptions of the benefits of competitive FFA activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character skills/Responsibility</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life skills</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidify classroom instruction</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work ethic</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive drive</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to win &amp; lose</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking, problem solving, &amp; decision making skills</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments listed below reflect the perceptions of pre-service agricultural science teachers in regards to the benefits of the competitive FFA program. These comments are just a sample of all the comments; however, they do represent the perceptions of the respondents. In order to maintain authenticity of the original meanings, the comments reported may include grammatical errors.

The competitive FFA program provides students with personal enrichment, opportunities to meet new people, learn new skills, explore career opportunities and make contacts.

fosters self-confidence, encourages quality of project/activity, encourages work ethic, improves student’s knowledge base

It teaches kids that we can’t always win. This is a benefit because it teaches kids how to accept losing. We need this in a society that thinks all kids must win all the time. They teach kids skills of tomorrow.

Students have a reward for learning and doing well in an area that they may feel strongly about or have a great interest in.

Objective Two

In an effort to further understand the condition of the competitive FFA program, respondents were asked to list what steps they believed should be taken to improve bad perceptions of competitive FFA activities, if any did exist. These statements were recorded and labeled by the researchers for further evaluation (Table 2).
Table 2. Respondents’ perceptions of how to improve bad perceptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Improvement</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Publicity (publish positives, wrongdoings, and benefits) and Public education</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor activities, rules, and awards</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on learning from events</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t mix competition and class work</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach students that they have a choice, winning is not everything</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punish rule breakers and enforce rules</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No bad perceptions exist</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More non-competitive events</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lead by example</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involve school administration</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over one-fourth of the pre-service agricultural science teachers (26.8%) perceived publicity and public education to be an appropriate method for improving bad perceptions regarding competitive FFA activities. Included under publicity were publish the positives, wrongdoings, and benefits of the competitive FFA program. Thirty-nine pre-service agricultural science teachers (14.9%) suggested monitoring activities, rules and awards more closely as a method of improving the perceptions of FFA activities. A total of 21 respondents (8.1%) perceived a need to focus more on learning from events in order to improve the perception of the competitive FFA program. Other suggestions offered included: not mixing competition and class work; punish rule breakers and enforce rules; teach our students they have a choice, winning is not everything; lead by example; involve school administrators; and more non-competitive events. A total of 11 respondents (4.2%) did not perceive bad perceptions regarding competitive FFA activities to exist.

The following comments reflect the perceptions of pre-service agricultural science teachers on how to improve the perceptions of competitive FFA activities, if bad perceptions exist. These comments are just a sample of all the comments; however, they do represent the perceptions of the respondents. In order to maintain authenticity of the original meanings, the comments reported may include grammatical errors.

*Don’t take them too seriously. Use them to build up people not tear them down.*

*Enforce the rules with tough consequences. Provide ethics/character education for teachers, pre-service teachers, and FFA members.*

*Try to focus more on the good than the bad—focus on the students that win without cheating rather than the cheaters. Maybe positive influences will help to defer cheating.*

*They can be improved by admitting that bad things can come from competition, but that the benefits far outweigh the bad.*

*educating students, parents and teachers about what is right and what is wrong—this may seem very basic, but because some practices may have been considered acceptable at one time it may be necessary*
Keep working and explain how these activities benefit the kids involved. We can keep improving them by making them practical to useful things we must use today and tomorrow.

We need to make sure all the teachers understand that it’s about teaching and learning not just winning.

Objective Three

In evaluating the overall condition of the FFA program respondents were asked to list their concerns with the overall ethical condition of the competitive FFA program, if any did exist. These statements were recorded and labeled by the researchers for further evaluation (Table 3).

Table 3. Respondents’ concerns with the overall ethical condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concern</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No concern</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition overshadowing other programs</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers, leaders, and advisors being bad examples</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livestock shows</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Win at all cost</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much emphasis on winning</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students not receiving real benefits of program</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judges</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over 16% of the respondents indicated that they were not concerned with the overall ethical condition of the competitive FFA program. This response was recorded only for those writing the statement “no concern” not for those pre-service agricultural science teachers that choose not to respond to the question. Thirty-six of the respondents (13.8%) were concerned with competition overshadowing other programs, while 30 respondents (11.5%) were concerned with teachers, leaders, and advisors being bad examples. Other responses included livestock shows (6.9%), competitors trying to win at all cost (6.5%), too much emphasis on winning (4.2%), parents (3.5%), accountability (3.1%), students not receiving real benefits (2.3%), and unfair judges (1.9%).

Comments listed below reflect the perceptions of pre-service agricultural science teachers in regards to the overall ethical condition of the competitive FFA program. These comments are just a sample of all the comments; however, they do represent the perceptions of the respondents. In order to maintain authenticity of the original meanings, the comments reported may include grammatical errors.

I think the ethical condition is in as good a condition as any competitive event.
I believe ethics are only a concern when winning becomes more important than learning. In these situations, cheating, etc. takes place. If the teams that win aren’t the teams that learn the most, there should be ethical concerns.

Overall, I think the FFA program is ethical. I think we tend to hear more about unethical practices even though the majority do follow the rules.

I believe we do not include parents enough! or for that matter the general public. Too much of what students achieve is only seen by teachers.

I believe the competitive experience involved w/FFA is vital to Agricultural Education. Negative feedback could eventually exterminate the opportunity for members to be involved.

I think that the program is awesome, if it’s used in the manner designed. Competition isn’t the only way to teach, it’s merely one of the ways.

It drives the program in many communities. Learning is not nearly as important as winning. So much attention and so much money are connected to these contests that some people are willing to do anything to win.

One of my main concerns is that the students that are not cheating are being stereo typed w/those who are—not all students are bad!

I believe it all resorts back to looking at the purpose of the contest wrong.

Conclusions

This study, while a part of a larger study, reported the perceptions of pre-service agricultural science teachers towards the competitive FFA program. It should be noted that this paper was based on the responses from open-ended questions and that none of these comments were solicited. The following is a summary of the findings.

1. The most frequently listed benefit of competitive FFA activities was leadership. Respondents also perceived teamwork to be a benefit that resulted from competitive FFA activities. Other benefits listed by respondents included character skills and responsibility; life skills; self-esteem; networking; solidify classroom instruction; communication skills; recognition; competitive drive; critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making skills; hard work; and learning to win and lose.

2. Respondents perceived publicity and public education to be an appropriate method for improving bad perceptions regarding competitive FFA activities. Included under publicity were publish the positives, wrongdoings, and benefits of the competitive FFA program. Monitoring activities, rules and awards more closely was also listed as a method of improving the perceptions of FFA activities. Other suggestions offered included focus more on learning from events; not mixing competition and class work; punish rule breakers and enforce rules; teach our students they have a choice, winning is not everything; lead by example; involve
school administrators; and more non-competitive events. A total of 11 respondents (4.2%) did not perceive bad perceptions regarding competitive FFA activities to exist.

3. Over 16% of the respondents indicated that they were not concerned with the overall ethical condition of the competitive FFA program. Thirty-six of the respondents (13.8%) were concerned with competition overshadowing other programs, while 30 respondents (11.5%) were concerned with teachers, leaders, and advisors being bad examples. Other responses included livestock shows, competitors trying to win at all cost, too much emphasis on winning, parents, accountability, students not receiving real benefits, and unfair judges.

**Recommendations**

1. Based on the recommendation of the respondents, there should be a continued push for values and value education by the FFA. Steps should be taken to educate the public towards the benefits of the FFA program. The National FFA program should receive more publicity to improve the perception of the program. However, at the same time, steps need to be taken to monitor activities more closely and to focus more on learning from the events. The competitive FFA program should be a learning tool for those involved and should not overshadow other FFA programs.

2. Based on the findings that FFA should increase public awareness similar studies should be conducted on the perceptions of those not involved in FFA. Follow-up should also be done with the respondents from this study to determine if their perception of the competitive FFA program changes with experience.

3. Based on the recommendations of the respondents, greater attention should be placed on academics and current practices in order to solidify the National FFA program for the future. This could require less emphasis on competitive activities such as livestock showing and CDEs.

4. Research should be conducted to determine why pre-service agricultural science teachers hold these perceptions. Consideration should be taken to determine what experiences have resulted in the forming of these perceptions. Further research is needed to determine if these perceptions are formed from experience or if they are simply excuses made by competitors who do not win. Careful consideration should also be used to examine the above perceptions and to determine if the unethical behaviors were witnessed first hand or if they are merely speculation.

**References**


