

Value of Supervised Occupational Experience Programs as Perceived by Parents, Employers, and Vocational Agriculture Instructors

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Supervised occupational experience (SOE) is a key component of vocational agriculture programs; one that involves not only teacher, classroom, and student, but parents and employers as well. Research, however, has primarily focused on the benefits of SOE as perceived by students. Williams (1979) indicated a need for additional SOE research to identify benefits perceived by vocational agriculture students, vocational agriculture teachers, parents, school administrators, and employers. Williams (1977) also identified parents as an important factor in vocational agriculture SOE programs. Rawls (1980) reported that parents thought students derived three major benefits from SOE: work attitudes, occupational development, and human relation skills. Rawls (1982) stated, "Parents of vocational agriculture students recognize the educational and occupational benefits derived from SOE programs and will generally support them if they can see the benefits provided to their son or daughter" (p. 38).

There is much anecdotal writing about the teacher's role in guiding and encouraging students to carry out effective SOE programs. Peterson and McCreight (1973) stated that, "One of the first requirements of an agricultural educator is to have a real dedication and commitment to a supervised occupational experience program for every student" (p. 244). McCracken (1975) described the importance of teacher supervision when he stated, "The success or failure of an occupational experience program for a student depends, to a large degree, upon the effectiveness of the supervision by the teacher" (p. 182). However, there is little in the literature to reflect the importance attributed to the teacher's perceptions of SOE. The student's SOE experience also depends greatly on the employer. Again, no research on determining employer perceptions concerning the value of SOE to students was located.

Purposes and Objectives

The purpose of this research was to determine the value of supervised occupational experience programs as perceived by parents, employers, and vocational agriculture instructors of graduates of the Idaho vocational agriculture programs from 1981 through 1986. The specific objectives were to:

1. Identify selected characteristics of the parents, employers, and vocational agriculture instructors.
2. Identify the benefits vocational agriculture students derive from SOE as perceived by parents, employers, and vocational agriculture instructors.
3. Determine where differences exist among the three groups (parents, employers, and instructors) in their perceptions of student benefits received from SOE.

Procedures

The population was initially divided into two sub-samples. The first sub-sample, the parents of the 1981 to 1985 graduates of high school vocational agriculture programs, was derived from a mailing list from the State Division of Vocational Education in Boise. From this list of approximately 5000 names, 300 names for each of the five years were randomly selected as an initial sub-sample. This group was contacted twice by mail in an attempt to obtain their current addresses. These mailings resulted in a 1981-85 parent sub-sample of 727, which was reduced to 708 after 19 undeliverable addresses were subtracted. The second sub-sample was randomly selected from among the 778, 1986 seniors' parents, stratified by the eight FFA districts in Idaho. Addresses of these parents were obtained directly from an earlier questionnaire administered to the 1986 seniors. Three hundred usable parent addresses from the 356 student questionnaires were added to the previous sub-sample of 708, giving the total parent sample of 1008 (1981-86).

The employers sampled (201) consisted of those who the two groups of students identified in the earlier surveys. Questionnaires were sent to all employers identified. The vocational agriculture instructors consisted of an instructor from each of the 76 vocational agriculture departments in Idaho during the 1985-86 school year. In multiple teacher departments questionnaires were addressed to the lead teacher.

Three survey instruments were designed by modifying instruments used by Williams and Rawls in studies conducted in Iowa during the late 1970s. The questionnaires consisted of two parts. In Part I, the respondents were given a list of benefit statements and were asked to rate them on a 1 to 9 scale, where 1 indicated no benefit from the SOE program, 5 indicated average benefit, and a 9 indicated much benefit. Although the parents had 42 benefits statements, the employers 39, and the instructors 52 benefit statements to rate, this paper reports only on the 30 benefit statements common to each of the groups. Part II was designed to collect data on the demographics of the respondents.

A Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was computed for the three questionnaires on the benefit statements based on the postfactum data. The parent questionnaire had a reliability coefficient of .98, the employer questionnaire .96, and the instructor coefficient .97.

A questionnaire and cover letter were mailed to each subject. A postcard reminder was mailed one week following the initial mailing with a second instrument mailed two weeks after the postcard. All questionnaires received five or more days after the second mailing were considered to be late; those received prior to that were classified as early. Research by Goldhor (1972) has shown that late respondents are often similar to non-respondents. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to test the significant differences in response patterns between the early and late groups. Only one benefit item in the instructor's list, "provided individualized instruction," and one item in the employer's list, "encouraged the use of approved business procedures," showed a difference between early and late respondents at the .05 probability level. Therefore, the sample data was generalized to the population of Idaho vocational agriculture teachers, parents, and employers of vocational agriculture students.

Ordinal level data dictated that nonparametric statistics be used to analyze and evaluate the data. Frequencies and percentages were used to

describe the demographic data. The mean, rank, and standard deviation were computed for each benefit item, and the Mann-Whitney U test was used to check for significant differences in the perceptions of the three groups.

Findings and Discussion

The response rates to the questionnaire are shown in Table 1. Fifty-two percent of the fathers and 2% of the mothers had been enrolled in vocational agriculture. Parents averaged approximately two children in programs of vocational agriculture. Over 80% of the vocational agriculture instructors had taught more than 10 years and were currently teaching in programs that had fewer than 70 students enrolled. Currently 61% of the employers of vocational agriculture students in SOE were involved directly in production agriculture, and employed approximately four students in the past five years.

Table 1
Percentage of Responses to Questionnaires

Respondent Type	<u>N</u> Sent	<u>N</u> Returned	Percent
Parents	1008	551	55
Employers	201	95	47
Instructors	76	65	86

The parent, instructor, and employer groups each rated 30 like-benefit statements. The rank order, means, and standard deviations are presented in Table 2. The instructors had higher mean scores on 19 of 30 benefit items than the parent or employer groups. All three groups rated the 30 benefit items higher than 5.00 (average benefit) with three exceptions. The employer group rated the following items less than 5.00; (a) learned to communicate effectively (4.97); (b) learned to identify problems in farming (4.82); and, (c) provided individualized instruction (4.24).

The five greatest benefits received from SOE programs as perceived by the combined groups were: (a) promoted acceptance of responsibility; (b) developed self-confidence; (c) provided opportunity to learn on own; (d) developed independence; and (e) learned to work with others. These benefit items deal with the attitudes, values, and interpersonal skills of the students. This finding is in agreement with that of Rawls (1980); parents felt students derived three major benefits from SOE; work attitudes, occupational development, and human relation skills. In the combined rating column, 8 of the top 10 benefit items were associated with student behavior.

The parents agreed with the five greatest benefits rated by the combined groups. Conversely, they rated the career benefit items lowest. The five lowest benefit items rated by parents were: (a) learned to identify problems in farming; (b) helped prepare for agricultural occupation; (c) encouraged the use of approved business procedures; (d) aided in choosing an occupation; and, (e) provided a way to grow into agribusiness. These low ratings might indicate that parents think their child's SOE is not related to what they see them doing for lifelong work.

Table 2
Comparisons of Like Benefits by Respondent Type (ranks, means, standard deviations)

Benefit Statements	<u>Groups Combined</u>			<u>Parents</u>			<u>Instructors</u>			<u>Employers</u>		
				N = 551			N = 65			N = 95		
Promoted accept. of responsibility	1	7.23	1.81	1	7.08	1.90	2	7.82	1.24	2	7.73	1.36
Developed self-confidence	2	7.11	1.90	2	7.03	2.12	11*	7.22	1.29	3	7.50	1.46
Provided oppor. to learn on own	3	7.06	1.81	4	6.97	1.91	3	7.60	1.27	9	7.22	1.48
Developed independence	4	7.03	1.82	5	6.94	1.92	10*	7.23	1.33	4	7.43	1.51
Learn to work with others	5	7.02	1.87	3	7.01	1.92	19*	6.60	1.52	5	7.36	1.70
Developed initiative	6*	6.91	1.89	7	6.80	1.99	9	7.28	1.26	6	7.32	1.57
Provided oppor. to make decisions	6*	6.91	1.85	6	6.82	1.91	4	7.57	1.27	12	6.95	1.70
Developed appreciation for work	7	6.88	1.96	8	6.76	2.04	11*	7.22	1.50	7	7.31	1.65
Provided oppor. to solve problems	8	6.82	1.81	9	6.71	1.87	6	7.43	1.25	11	7.00	1.64
Helped learn things not in vo-ag	9	6.69	2.22	13	6.45	2.29	1	7.88	0.98	8	7.23	2.02
Dev. accept. work/personal habits	10*	6.63	1.97	11	6.53	2.03	10*	7.23	1.42	13	6.84	1.86
Developed citizenship traits	10*	6.63	2.11	10	6.68	2.16	23	6.17	1.79	15	6.65	2.01
Provided motivation to learn	11	6.48	2.14	14	6.40	2.26	17*	6.72	1.43	14	6.80	1.76
Encouraged record keeping	12	6.47	2.25	12	6.52	2.22	14*	6.97	1.27	27	5.09	2.35
Learned to use time efficiently	13*	6.36	2.02	17	6.24	2.10	21	6.36	1.40	10	7.19	1.76

(table continues)

Table 2 continued

Helped make vo-ag practical	13*	6.36	2.18	15	6.33	2.14	8	7.35	1.62	20	5.87	2.57
Learned to ID strengths & weaknesses	14	6.30	1.95	16	6.31	2.00	22	6.19	1.58	17	6.30	1.96
Helped earn money while in school	15	6.29	2.70	25	5.85	2.80	7	7.39	1.59	1	8.15	1.43
Encouraged a college education	16	6.26	0.24	18	6.23	2.50	24	6.02	1.92	16	6.63	2.37
Helped set educational goals	17*	6.05	2.21	21	6.05	2.27	18	6.65	1.55	22	5.65	2.18
Provided individual instruction	17*	6.05	2.47	19	6.17	2.40	5*	7.47	1.35	30	4.24	2.57
Helped set career goals	18	6.04	2.30	22	5.93	2.37	14*	6.97	1.27	18	6.07	2.27
Allowed indepth look at ag area	19*	5.93	2.26	23	5.88	2.27	17*	7.72	1.48	21	5.67	2.54
Developed abil. to manage money	19*	5.93	2.27	24	5.87	2.26	12	7.11	1.36	25	5.45	2.56
Learned to communicate effectively	20	5.92	2.29	20	6.11	2.28	5*	7.47	1.35	28	4.97	2.45
Helped prepare for ag occupation	21	5.83	2.37	27	5.75	2.39	16	6.75	1.55	23	5.63	2.59
Learned to ID problems in farming	22	5.79	2.29	26	5.79	2.24	13	7.06	1.45	29	4.82	2.66
Encouraged use of bus. procedures	23	5.76	2.19	28	5.69	2.21	15	6.94	1.50	26	5.35	2.27
Aided in choosing occupation	24	5.74	2.29	29	5.63	2.36	20	6.45	1.36	19	5.89	2.29
Provided way to grow into agbus.	25	5.46	2.51	30	5.32	2.56	19*	6.60	1.43	24	5.46	2.61

Note: * Tie in rank of mean score,
Means determined from rating 1 to 9 where 1 no benefit, 5 = average benefit, and 9 much benefit.

Instructors rated, helped learn extra things not taught in vo-ag class, provided opportunity to make decisions, provided individualized instruction, and, learned to communicate effectively, as the top five benefit items. Because instructors should understand the purposes of the three components of vocational agriculture (classroom, SOE, and FFA) more completely than parents or employers, they may have felt that, developed self-confidence, developed independence, and, learned to work with others, are more a function of the EEA component, whereas the parents and employers may have believed these benefits to be a result of the total vocational agriculture program.

The items rated lowest by the instructors were: (a) encouraged to seek a college education; (b) developed citizenship traits; (c) learned to identify strengths and weaknesses; (d) learned to use time efficiently; and, (e) aided in choosing an occupation. Since these are seen as benefits of the vocational agriculture program, the instructors' low rankings of these five benefit items might indicate they do not view them as resulting solely from the SOE component. Only one of these, aided in choosing an occupation, was also rated in the bottom five by the parents.

The employers rated, helped earn money while in school, with a mean of 8.15. The instructors rated this benefit a 7.39, while parents rated it 5.85. Parents placed less relative importance on money earned from SOE than did the employers and instructors. One explanation might be that parents think they are providing the financial resources for their children and they see SOE more as an influence on their child's behavior than as a source of income. The employer group agreed with the parents on the first five benefit items except for, helped earn money while in school, which they ranked first.

The Mann-Whitney U test was used to determine significant differences in group responses to the 30 like-benefit items. Those differences that were significant at $p < .05$ are shown in Table 3. The benefit item encouraged the keeping of records, was rated significantly higher by instructors (6.97) than by the parents (6.52) and employers (5.09); the parents' rating was significantly higher than that of the employers. The instructors and parents perceived record keeping as being a skill much more closely related to SOE than did the employers.

The instructors rated, helped in making vocational agriculture practical, (7.35) significantly higher than did the parents (6.33) and the employers (5.87), perhaps because instructors see SOE as the practical application of what is learned in the classroom. The parents and employers may not see this connection as clearly, or, indeed, this claim by vocational agriculturalists may not be a valid one.

The three groups rated, provided individualized instruction, significantly different. The instructors (7.47) ranked it fifth, while the employers (4.24) ranked it last. The parents' rating (6.17) also was significantly higher than that of the employers. One explanation could be that the employers do not view on-site visitation as individualized instruction. This may mean that vocational agriculture instructors are not making adequate numbers of supervisory visits or that more explanation of the SOE program to parents and employers is needed.

Of the 30 benefit items, 27 showed significant differences among the three groups at the .05 level. This may indicate that parents, instructors, and employers view the benefits of SOE differently. One possible explanation

would be that vocational agriculture instructors are doing a less than adequate job in effectively educating the parents and employers on the SOE program philosophy and procedures. Perhaps vocational agriculture instructors should capitalize on the SOE benefits as perceived by parents and employers, rather than try to change their perceptions.

Table 3
Comparison of Like Benefits by Respondent Type

Benefit Statements	Sign. Diff.
Provided motivation to learn	I > P ^a
Provided opportunity to learn on own	I, E > P
Promoted acceptance of responsibility	E > P
Developed independence	E > P
Developed initiative	E > P
Provided opportunity to solve problems	I > P
Provided opportunity to make decisions	I > P > E
Developed an appreciation for work	E > P
Developed citizenship traits	P > I
Developed self-confidence	
Aided in choosing an occupation	I > P
Learned to use time efficiently	E > I, P
Learned to identify strengths and weaknesses	
Provided individualized instruction	I > P > E
Learned to identify problems in farming	I > P > E
Encouraged the keeping of records	I > P > E
Developed the ability to manage money	I > P, E
Provided a way to grow into agribusiness	I > P, E
Encouraged to seek a college education	E > I
Learned to communicate effectively	P > E
Helped in making vocational agriculture practical	I > P, E
Developed acceptable work and personal habits	I > P
Encouraged the use of approved business procedures	I > P, E
Helped set educational goals	I > E
Helped earn money while in school	E > I > P
Learn to work with others	P, E > I
Helped learn extra things not taught in vo ag class	I, E > P
Helped set career goals	I > P, E
Helped prepare for agriculture occupations	I > P, E
Allowed to look in depth at area of ag interest	I > P, E

Note: Individual comparisons tested using the Mann-Whitney test; $p \leq .05$.

^aP = Parents, I = Instructors, E = Employers

Recommendations

The data show that parents and employers recognize that SOE benefits students. Teachers of vocational agriculture, agricultural teacher educators, and state supervisors should continue to utilize parents and employers of vocational agriculture students to support the SOE program. If parents and employers believe that a program benefits students, they generally will support that program.

Vocational agriculture teachers must educate parents and employers on the philosophy and procedures of SOE. When 27 of 30 benefit items were rated

significantly different among the parent, instructor, and employer groups, indicating that the SOE story is not being told very effectively by the vocational agriculture instructors to the parents and employers.

Further research needs to be conducted to identify how parents and employers perceive the classroom, laboratory, and FFA components of vocational agriculture in relation to the benefits derived by students. Some of the responses in this study indicated that parents and employers knew of the vocational agriculture program benefits to the student, but they could not accurately attribute them to one of the three components, classroom, SOE, or the FFA.

Researchers may want to conduct further studies on the role the vocational agriculture student plays in influencing how parents and employers perceive the value of the SOE program. By understanding the factors which influence parents' and employers' perceptions of SOE and vocational agriculture, those involved in agricultural education can better market the vocational agriculture program.

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