RECRUITMENT PRACTICES--A NATIONAL SURVEY OF AGRICULTURAL EDUCATORS

Tracy S. Hoover, Assistant Professor
Dennis C. Scanlon, Associate Professor
The Pennsylvania State University

In recent years, declining enrollment in secondary agricultural education programs and corresponding decreases in FFA membership have been of great concern to individuals in agricultural education. Many factors contribute to declining enrollment: agriculture's negative image, an anti-vocational bias and, in response to reports such as a A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), increased academic requirements for high school graduation. We also know the image of agricultural education, its perceived future value and the role of significant others are barriers to enrollment in secondary agricultural education programs (Scanlon, Yoder & Hoover, 1989). Therefore we need to ask what are secondary agricultural educators are doing to market their programs and change negative perceptions of prospective enrollees while still exulting the benefits and opportunities available to students in agricultural education and the FFA.

There appears to be a negative perception among secondary students concerning employ-ment opportunities in agriculture and related vocational areas. Sproles (1987) found that non-traditional graduates in agricultural education programs were less likely than traditional graduates to perceive agricultural education as preparing them for a well paying job. Mallory and Sommer (1986) found that many high school students were unaware of the range of agricultural careers, and rated agricultural jobs low in terms of stability, a secure future, and earning power. In a 1989 study conducted by the Farm Foundation, 58% of over 2500 college bound students not majoring in agriculture thought agricultural related careers included farming and ranching and 70% of this group thought agricultural related careers involved or required manual labor. Rossetti (1988) found the major enrollment barriers in vocational programs were: (1) program content was not parallel with the nonenrollees' career goal(s) and (2) perceptions that enrollment into vocational programs conflicted with the acquisition of a college degree. A quote by the National Advisory Council on Vocational Education found in Sher (1977) brings their entire vocational bias into perspective.

> At the very heart of our problem is a national attitude that says vocational education is designed for somebody else's children. This attitude is shared by businessmen, labor leaders, administrators, teachers, parents, and students. We are all guilty. We have promoted the idea that the only good education is an education capped by four years of college. This idea, transmitted by our values, our aspirations, and our silent support, is snobbish, undemocratic and a revelation of why schools fail so many students. (p. 312)

The problem of biased opinions about agricultural career opportunities from the students' point of view, coupled with the public's preconceived opinion about vocational education, is further compounded by recruitment practices used by many vocational education programs.

Scanlon, Arrington, Cheek and Beeman (1984) found the recruitment practice perceived to be the most successful by area vocational technical school directors was encouraging high school students to take vocational courses while completing graduation requirements at their high school. However, the recruitment practice utilized the most frequently by area vocational technical school directors was display booths at fairs and exhibitions at shopping malls. Based on the data, there was an obvious discrepancy between recruitment practices perceived to be successful and recruitment practices actively being used to recruit students.

Agricultural education is not a compulsory course. Students elect to enter the program, thereby necessitating a critical need for program reform. On a more fundamental note it should be recognized that individuals join organizations for three major reasons. First, they like the task or activity of the group (the agriculture curriculum, the FFA). Second, they like the people in the group (the agriculture instructor[s], friends in the program). Finally, the group satisfies a need lying outside that group (the chance to compete and excel in various FFA activities, a career and/or postsecondary education in agriculture) **(Quey,** 1971). There is a question whether the recruitment practices currently being used by agricultural educators are based on sociological factors that influence membership.

Purpose and Objectives

The problem in this study focused on two questions: 1) How do secondary agricultural educators recruit students into their programs? and, 2) Do teachers use different recruitment practices based upon past experience in agricultural education and the FFA? The following objectives were formulated:

1. To compare recruitment practices that secondary agricultural educators perceive to be effective and the practices they currently use in their programs.

2. To compare frequently used recruitment practices and their perceived efficacy by secondary agricultural educators enrolled in agricultural education/FFA programs in high school and those teachers who were not enrolled in agricultural education/FFA programs in high school.

Procedures

Sample: Based on geographic, regional and demographic differences (gender, race) that reflect the 1987-88 population of FFA membership density patterns throughout the U.S., the following 24 states were purposely chosen to participate in the study: Alabama, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

State supervisors and teacher educators in each state were asked to identify at least three programs recognized as outstanding secondary agricultural education programs in their state. This selection process was used to control two moderating variables that may otherwise influence a teacher's recruitment efforts, e.g., less than a good program and lack of support from the community or administration. A total of 85 teachers were identified by state supervisors (49) and teacher educators (36).

Instrumentation: Based on a review of literature, an instrument was developed for teachers to evaluate a series of 64 recruitment practices which were categorized into nine areas: personal contacts, national FFA organization materials, local program materials, school administration/faculty, local agriculture and community service public relations, interschool programs, media, classroom activities, and FFA organizational activities. Teachers were asked to indicate, using a 3-point Likert-type scale, how frequently they used each recruitment practice and its perceived effectiveness. A panel of faculty and graduate students in the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education at The Pennsylvania State University examined the instrument for clarity and content validity. Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients for the 64-item frequency and effectiveness scales were .88 and .93, respectively, and ranged from .51-.70 and .64 -.85 for the nine frequency and effectiveness subscales.

Data Collection/Analysis: The questionnaire was mailed during winter 1988 to the 85 teachers identified to oarticioate in the study. Seventy-one teachers (86%) responded to the initial mailing. A follow-up telephone call resulted in three additional instruments-being returned for an 87% response rate. To detect potential selection bias, teachers chosen by state supervisors and teacher educators were compared statistically to determine the degree of agreement on selected perceived effectiveness and frequently used recruitment activities. Spearman's rho correlation coefficients indicated a high degree of agreement in the perceptions of the two groups of teachers ($p \leq .05$) on perceived effectiveness and frequently used recruitment activities (r_s = .75 and r_s = 99, respectively). The data were analyzed with descriptive and inferential statistics.

Results

The 74 teachers participating taught an average of 13 years. The majority (73%) were reared in rural, farm, or ranch settings and 80% were enrolled in agricultural education and the FFA during high school. The teachers were asked to evaluate 64 recruitment practices for effectiveness and frequency of use. The practices were grouped into nine categories which were analyzed for mean effectiveness and mean frequency of use. Table 1 contains the mean scores and ranking for the nine recruitment categories.

Table 1
Mean Scores and Ranking by Teachers for the Nine Recruitment Practice Categories (n = 74)

Recruitment Category	Mean Effectiveness	Rank	Mean Frequency	Rank
FFA organization activities	2.49	1	2.53	1
School administration, faculty, and school board public relations	2.42	2	2.25	2
Classroom activities	2.39	3	2.20	3
Local agriculture, community service, and professional organization public relations	2.36	4	2.17	4
Personal contacts	2.34	5	1.96	7
Interschool programs	2.21	6	2.08	5
National program material	2.12	7	2.05	6
Local program materials usage	2.12	7	1.83	8
Media	2.09	9	1.83	8

Note: Scale used; 3 = Very effective/ always used, 2 = Some effectiveness/sometimes used, 1 = Not effective/never used. r_s = .93; $p < .05$; $n = 9$.

Table 2
Frequency of Use for the Ten Most Frequently Used Recruitment Practices by Teachers Who Were or Were Not Agricultural Education/FFA Members in High School

Recruitment Practice	Teachers' High School Background: Not in Ag/FFA (n = 15) f	%	In Ag/FFA (n = 59) f	%
Encourage participation in FFA Organization contests (87.8%).	11	73.3	54	91.5
Encourage attendance of district, state, regional, and national activities (86.5%).	11	73.3	54	91.5
Encourage 100% FFA organization membership (85.1%)	9	60.0	52	88.1
Involve students in FFA award programs: leadership, proficiency, computers in agriculture, scholarship, etc. (82.4%)	10	66.7	52	88.1
Present recruitment presentation to the 8th grade students (78.4%).	10	66.7	48	81.4
Sponsor National FFA Week activities in schools and community (70.8%).	5	33.3	46	81.4
Report and advertise activities in local and regional newspapers (67.6%).	5	33.3	45	76.3
Utilize an agricultural education advisory committee made up of agriculture producers, agribusiness people, community leaders, etc. (64.9%).	5	33.3	43	72.9
Utilize presentations and/or visitations of state and national FFA officers (58.9%).	6	40.0	37	62.7
Provide school libraries with the National FFA magazine, The Future Farmer (56.8%).	7	46.7	35	59.3

Note: Frequencies and percentages reported exclude missing cases, Percent of all teachers (n = 74) responding "always use."

Teachers ranked recruitment activities in the category "FFA organization activities" as most effective and most frequently used. Teachers ranked media, which included using local news-papers, radio and television, as the least effective and least frequently used recruitment activity. A Spearman's rho correlation coefficient of .93 indicated a very high positive agreement between the perceived effectiveness and frequency of use of the recruitment categories.

Within the nine categories, there were several practices not frequently used but perceived by the teachers to be very effective to recruit students. For example, home visits by agriculture teachers and contacts made with prospective students by past and present agricultural education students were perceived to be very effective recruitment practices. However, only 20% of the teachers always visited prospective students and less than one-half of the teachers used past and present students to visit prospective students. An additional recruitment activity perceived to be very effective by 66% of the teachers was the incorporation of new technology/practices into the curriculum; however, only 53% of the teachers consistently incorporate new technology/practices into the curriculum.

In comparing the recruitment practices of teachers who were agricultural education/FFA members in high school with those who were not, a consistent trend arises between frequently used recruitment activities and previous high school enrollment. The top four recruitment practices utilized by both groups of teachers dealt with the FFA organization/related activities. Data in Table 2 suggest that those teachers (n = 59) who were agricultural education/FFA members in high school were more likely to use the FFA organization and related activities for recruitment practices. These two groups of teachers rated the FFA and related activities as the three most effective recruitment practices. Data in Table 3 suggest a discrepancy between the perceived effectiveness of these FFA recruitment practices between the two groups of teachers. Teachers who were agricultural education students/FFA members in high school perceived FFA recruitment practices to be more effective in recruiting students than those teachers who were not agricultural education students/FFA members in high school.

Table 3
Perceived Effectiveness of the Top Ten Recruitment Practices by Teachers Who Were or Were Not Agricultural Education/FFA Members in High School

Recruitment Practice	Teachers' High School Background: Not in Ag/FFA (n = 15) f	%	In Ag/FFA (n = 59) f	%
Encourage participation in contests (77%').	7	46.7	50	84.7
Encourage attendance of district, state, regional, and national activities (73%).	6	40.0	48	81.4
Involve students in FFA award programs: leadership, proficiency, computers in agriculture, scholarship, etc. (73%)	7	46.7	47	79.7
Present recruitment presentation to the 8th grade students (70.8%).	10	66.7	41	71.9
Home visits of prospective students by agricultural education instructor (69%).	5	33.3	42	71.2
Report and advertise activities in local and regional newspapers (66.2%).	6	40.0	43	72.9
Involve teachers, counselors, and community members as judges for FFA organization contests (62.5%).	7	46.7	38	64.4
Incorporate new technological ideas and practices into the classroom (66.2%).	8	53.3	41	69.5
Offer field trips to modern, technical, and progressive agricultural operations and businesses (60.8%).	10	66.7	35	59.3

Note: Frequencies and percentages reported exclude missing cases.
Percent of all teachers (n = 74) responding "very effective."

Conclusions

This study provided some insight at the national level of what is currently being done to recruit students into secondary agricultural education programs. Additionally, the perceived effectiveness of various recruitment practices was also evaluated. While the findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of secondary agricultural educators, the results provided some explanation for the issue of declining enrollment in agricultural education programs.

There was no difference between the frequency of use and the perceived effectiveness of selected recruitment and retention practices by secondary agricultural educators in this study. The most frequently used recruitment practice and those rated the most effective were FFA organization related activities. Teachers recruited potential students with examples of opportunities available to them through the FFA. The National FFA Organization annually provides all agriculture teachers with an attractive FFA recruitment package. This and the FFA's reputation of providing opportunities for success, e.g., "Be all that you can be" provided the agriculture teacher with a repertoire of tools with which to sell the program. Unfortunately, evidence suggested that while instructors are using an excellent youth organization to sell their secondary programs they are also selling an image, the image that the FFA is an organization for farm youth. The National Committee on Agricultural Education (1988) concluded that "FFA's name, symbols, contests, awards, and requirements for advancement are still largely geared toward production agriculture" (p. 32).

Those teachers in the study who were enrolled in agricultural education/FFA programs in high school perceived FFA recruitment activities to be more effective and used these activities more frequently to recruit students than those students who were not enrolled in agricultural education/FFA programs in high school. However, both groups of teachers rated FFA recruitment activities as the most effective recruitment practices and used these activities more frequently than any other activity. This type of behavior can be substantiated from sociological research that seeks to explain the relationship between attitudes and consistent behavior. Regan and Fazio (1977) and Fazio and Zanna (1981) determined that attitudes formed through direct experience exert a stronger influence on subsequent behaviors than attitudes formed indirectly.

This helps explain why teachers who were enrolled in agricultural education/FFA in high school used FFA activities to a greater extent to recruit students and perceived these activities to be more effective in recruiting students that those teachers who were not enrolled in agricultural education/FFA in high school. Those individuals who had a positive FFA experience and perceived that experience to be valuable would be more likely to "sell" the FFA and related activities. While the FFA proved to be the most frequently used and rated the most effective recruitment item for those teachers who were not enrolled in agricultural education/FFA in high school, this group did not use the FFA as frequently or rate FFA activities as effective as those who were agricultural education/FFA members in high school.

Implications/Recommendations

It appears that several recruitment activities perceived to be very effective, yet not frequently used, were ones that were time consuming, e.g., visiting prospective students and integrating new technology and practices into the curriculum. Only two-thirds of the teachers thought that integrating new technology into the curriculum was an effective recruitment practice and only slightly more than one-half were actually doing this on a consistent basis. Wells and Todd (1990) suggested that the agricultural curricula should be frequently revamped and teachers should remove outdated content and substitute relevant agricultural practices and technology.

Knight (1987) provided several recruitment practices for agricultural instructors. First, written materials and brochures should be revised to include gender neutral text and photos. Second, involve both males and females in recruitment presentations and slide films. Third, use the FFA as a recruiting tool but be aware that many students may consider enrolling in agricultural education based upon their opinion of the FFA. Fourth, provide interactive "hands on" recruitment sessions for potential students. Finally, utilize appropriate role models (e.g., females/males & nontraditional/traditional individuals) to recruit students.

The FFA and its related activities appear to be the main focal point in a high percentage of recruitment practices used by agricultural education teachers. The use of the FFA as a recruitment tool is obvious and dramatically more so for teachers who were agricultural education/FFA members. Those teachers who were not agricultural education/FFA members in high school were also using

FFA and related activities to recruit students into their programs but to a lesser extent. This poses some thought provoking questions for the profession. Is this because the FFA is so closely intertwined with our past and present agricultural education programs that activities and contests indirectly "drive" the curriculum, therefore making FFA the main selling point of the program? Or is it because the FFA has been so well designed that contests and activities complement the curriculum? Shouldn't our programs first be sold based on the content of the curriculum and second for the opportunities available to students through the FFA?

Based upon the conclusions of this study several recommendations are suggested. First, provide agriculture teachers, counselors, and school administrators with information that sells the value and broad mission of agricultural education. This, in conjunction with the FFA recruitment materials, can promote the agricultural program and the youth organization. Second, with the help of local, state and national agricultural educators, launch an intensive public relations program involving agricultural industries that addresses the stigma of "vocational" agricultural education. Finally, provide agricultural instructors, through preservice and inservice education, with alternative strategies on how to market their programs.

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