

PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF GEORGIA GUIDANCE COUNSELORS REGARDING AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions and attitudes of counselors toward high school agriculture programs in the state of Georgia. All 170 high school counselors with high school agriculture program in the state of Georgia served as the population for the study. A mail questionnaire was developed by the researchers from the review of literature. As a group, the counselors were positive about the benefits of Agricultural Education. They seemed to feel that agriculture teachers had a positive professional working relationship with colleagues. Although they were "undecided" about the quality of the local program and about offering academic credit for agriculture, the counselors were varied in their opinions. Correlations indicated that those who perceived the local programs as being quality programs, supported the idea of science credit and the course content as being valuable to college bound students. The same conclusion may be reached in regard to the practices of the counselors regarding the Agricultural Education program. Those who perceived quality in the courses were more likely to place students into the program regardless of the student's future work or college plans. As a group, the counselors appeared to be uninformed about the programs offered in Agricultural Education.

Historically there has been agreement among those responsible for counselor education that school counselors should assume a central role in promoting career education programs in the schools. Counselors play a major role in the development of students from secondary education to the world of work. To promote a central role in career education, counselors need a thorough understanding of and familiarity with the various kinds of work and the changes characterizing the world of work (Flum & Oppenheimer, 1988). One aim of guidance is to promote healthy concepts and psychological growth through the curriculum (Tennyson, Miller, Skovholt, & Williams, 1989). Student access to vocational education courses and programs has always been a function of counseling and of schedule compromises. As more and more vocational programs are consolidated into area schools and skills centers, access is further constrained (Lotto, 1985).

Assisting students as they decide, plan, and pursue post-high school education is one of the major functions of counselors and their corresponding program in high school. When students are accustomed to having the assistance of counselors in their progress toward high school graduation they perceive educational advisement toward tertiary levels of education as a natural extension of services. In addition, parents, high school faculties, and administrators also identify this direct service as high priority (Rowe, 1989).

Personnel from technical colleges, colleges, and universities acknowledge high school counselors as the key link for students as they make the transition from secondary education to higher education (Rowe, 1989). Counselors, as practitioner-scientists could have considerable influence and impact on providing such information. Guidance counselors have great impact on students' choices of educational programs

and careers after graduation. In general, counselors may advise students to choose either conventional academic programs or vocational programs, each leading to dramatically different careers (Sproles, 1988). Counselors often encourage conventional choices, with modest emphasis on vocational choices (Lewis & Kaltreider, 1976).

Agricultural Education is in the process of change. A major part of the change is the move toward a more science based curriculum. Concepts and principles of chemistry, biology, genetics, physiology, and zoology are readily applied to plant and animal studies emphasized in Agricultural Education (Moss, 1985).

The concern for integrating more science and technology into the agricultural curriculum has been spurred by four movements: a) the national back to basics emphasis on math and science; b) the national study on Agricultural Education in the United States which indicated that "subject matter about agriculture and in agriculture should be broadened" (National Research Council, 1988); c) the expressed need by industry for employees to be able to solve problems and think more critically (National Council on Vocational Education, 1990); and, d) the rapid pace by which agriculture is changing as a result of technological advances.

The Committee on Agricultural Education in Secondary schools (National Research Council, 1988) identified thirteen social, economic, and technical changes or advancements influencing the context of American agriculture including the following: demographics, urbanization, lifestyle changes, new biotechnological techniques, and public expectations about the role of schools (Budke, 1991). In the mid 1980s, state boards of education began to respond to recommendations in the Nation at Risk report (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). As a result, graduation requirements for high school students became more stringent. In many high schools, students were required to take more courses in such academic subject areas as English, math, and

science (Trexler & Barrett, 1992).

The Unfinished Agenda, a report of the National Commission on Secondary Vocational Education, stated that secondary education is in the grip of a back-to-basics movement that threatens vocational education. In 1985, the Georgia General Assembly unanimously passed the Quality Basic Education Act (QBE) aimed at improving public education in Georgia. QBE specified ten major needs to be met by the public school system through legislation. Among the provisions of the Act were the increase in math and science requirements for graduation, a system for the evaluation of teachers, and a statewide basic curriculum (Georgia State Department of Education, 1985). These recommendations documented and precipitated a recent focus within Agricultural Education on agricultural science or 'agriscience' education (National FFA Organization, 1991).

Given the importance guidance counselors play in the enrollment of students into programs and the changes within programs of Agricultural Education, a study was needed to determine the perceptions and practices of counselors toward high school Agricultural Education in the state of Georgia.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study were to determine:

1. the perceptions of counselors in Georgia concerning Agricultural Education.
2. practices conducted by counselors in regard to Agricultural Education programs.
3. the degree of quality counselors perceive in Agricultural Education programs.
4. the counselors' degree of awareness of programs in Agricultural Education.

5. counselors' perception of science credit for students in Agricultural Education.
6. the relationship between counselor perception of quality in the local program and their perceptions and practices toward the Agricultural Education programs.

Methods and Procedures

All Georgia high school counselors employed in schools with high school Agricultural Education programs served as the population for the study. Since the entire population was of a manageable size, a population study was conducted that included all 170 identified counselors.

To collect data for the study, a questionnaire was developed by the researchers from the review of literature. A panel of experts consisting of university faculty and graduate students examined the questionnaire for content and face validity. Reliability was checked using Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient. The alpha for the instrument was .85.

A mailing and follow-up yielded a total of 133 surveys for a 78% return. A random sample of ten of the 37 non-respondents were followed up with a phone call to determine non-response bias. No differences were determined between respondents and non-respondents.

Findings

Of the guidance counselors who made up the population for the study, a little over 82% had been a counselor for 5 years or more. Only 15% took agriculture when they were in high school. Only 7% of the counselors responded that the school where they worked offered science credit for agriculture.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Statements Regarding Attitudes About Agricultural Education

Objective One: *To determine the perceptions of counselors in Georgia concerning Agricultural Education.*

The counselors were asked to respond to statements regarding the Agricultural Education program in their school. Their responses were measured using a five point Likert scale where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. The mid-point (3) was labeled as "undecided". The data in Table 1 indicate that the counselors were undecided (a mean greater than three and less than 4) on statements regarding Agricultural Education for college prep students or students regardless of academic ability.

They agreed (a mean greater than 4) with statements regarding students benefiting from the program and with statements regarding the professionalism of the agriculture teachers. They disagreed (a mean less than 3) with statements regarding Agricultural Education being for non college bound students and the less academically inclined.

Objective Two: *To determine practices conducted by counselors in regard to advising students on Agricultural Education programs.*

Using the same Likert scale as in objective 1, the counselors were asked to respond to statements about their practices in advising students on agricultural education. As indicated by the data in Table 2, the counselors agreed (mean = 4.31) that they would advise a college bound student interested in Agriculture to enroll.

However, they were undecided (a mean greater than three and less than 4) as to whether they would advise students to enroll where there

Statement	M*	SD
Students enrolled in Agricultural Education courses receive benefits from these courses.	4.29	0.58
Agricultural Education teachers have positive professional relationships with school administrators.	4.15	0.78
Agricultural Education courses develop skills needed for employment in business and industry.	4.05	0.73
Agricultural Education teachers have positive professional relationships with academic teachers.	4.04	0.93
Agricultural Education is valuable for all students, regardless of their academic ability.	3.97	0.94
Our Agricultural Education teachers are as effective in their teaching ability as our academic teachers.	3.86	1.02
Agricultural Education reinforces and enhances learning in academic courses.	3.77	0.92
I am knowledgeable about the course content, objectives, and nature of instruction in our Agricultural Education classes.	3.76	0.85
Agricultural Education courses in our school would benefit college prep students.	3.75	0.85
Agricultural Education classes provide students with competencies they will need to succeed in college.	3.53	0.89
Parents of college-prep students are reluctant to have their children enroll in Agricultural Education classes.	3.21	1.15
Students who take Agricultural Education courses tend to be less academically able.	2.72	1.21
Agricultural Education courses are primarily intended for the non-college bound student.	2.32	1.12
College bound students are not interested in taking Agricultural Education courses.	2.70	1.19

____ *1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree

Table 2. Practices of Counselors Regarding Agricultural Education

Statement	M*	S.D.
If a college bound student expresses interest in an Agricultural Education course, our guidance departments tends to advise him/her to enroll.	4.31	0.62
Our guidance department tends to advise students regardless of academic record, to consider enrolling in Agricultural Education classes.	3.87	0.74
Our guidance department tends to advise students regardless of future college or work plans, to consider enrolling in Agricultural Education classes.	3.83	0.78
When scheduling conflicts occur, our guidance department tends to advise college bound students to consider enrolling in Agricultural Education courses as opposed to non-required academic courses.	3.17	1.04
When scheduling conflicts occur, our guidance department tends to advise non-college bound students to consider enrolling in Agricultural Education courses as opposed to non-required academic courses.	3.12	1.14

*1 = strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree

were conflicts in scheduling. It should be noted that for most of the statements there was a relatively high standard deviation which indicates that there were varying degrees of responses.

Objective Three: *To determine the degree of quality counselors perceive in Agricultural Education Programs.*

Again the respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with statements using the five-point Likert scale. The statements centered around the perceived value of the Agricultural Education programs in their schools. All three statements received a mean response between 3 and 4 on the scale. This seemed to indicate that the counselors were undecided as to the value of the program. The

means had a high standard deviation which indicated there was not a close consensus among the respondents. The data are displayed in Table 3.

Objective Four: *To determine the counselor's degree of awareness of programs in Agricultural Education.*

The counselors were asked to indicate on a five point Likert scale (1 = very low and 5 = very high), their degree of awareness with several programs in Agricultural Education. As indicated in Table 4, of 15 different programs, the highest rating was for the individual (3.71) and team (3.74) judging contests. Over one half of the programs

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations for Counselors Perceptions of Quality in Agricultural Education Programs

Statement	M*	SD
Value of the program to students who do not plan to attend college.	3.83	0.91
How do you rate the Agricultural Ed program at your high school as compared with other Ag Ed programs?	3.74	1.06
Value of the program to students who plan to attend college.	3.27	1.06

*1 = Very Low; 5 = Very High

Table 4. Counselor Awareness of Programs in Agricultural Education Agricultural Education Programs

FFA Program	M*	SD
FFA Team Judging Contests	3.74	1.12
FFA Individual Contest	3.71	1.15
FFA National Chapter Award	3.39	1.31
FFA Scholarship Program	3.37	1.32
Public Speaking Contests	3.28	1.32
FFA Agricultural Proficiency Program	3.12	1.23
Supervised Agricultural Experience Programs	3.04	1.30
Agri-Science Awards Program	2.81	1.25
Washington Leadership Conference	2.41	1.23
Computers in Agriculture	2.33	1.20
National Safety Award Program	2.33	1.08
Food for America Program	2.29	1.09
Made for Excellence Program	2.18	1.08
Work Experience Abroad Program	2.11	1.02
Building our American Communities	2.06	1.03

*1 = Very Low; 5 = Very High

had a mean response of less than three. This indicates that the counselors as a group had a low level of awareness of most of the programs. Note that there was a high standard deviation for the means of all of the items.

Objective 5: *To determine counselor's perception of science credit for students in agricultural programs.*

To elicit their perceptions regarding the awarding of science credit for Agricultural

Education courses, the respondents were presented with six statements concerning the topic. As the counselors were undecided on the issue. The means ranged from a low of 2.95 to a high of 3.51. High standard deviations indicate that there was a wide range in the responses among the group (Table 5).

Objective 6: *To determine the relationship between counselor perceptions of quality in the local program and perceptions and practices toward the Agricultural Education program.*

To determine the relationship, a Pearson Product Moment Correlation was conducted. The variables were the responses of the counselors

regarding the statement on how they perceived the quality of their local Agricultural Education program compared to other Agricultural Education programs and 24 items designed to measure their attitudes and practices regarding the program. Of the 24 items correlated, 18 were significantly correlated at or below the .05 level. Particularly high correlations were detected on items concerning college bound students in the program and the professionalism of agriculture teachers (Table 6).

Conclusions and Implications

As a group, the counselors were positive about the benefits of Agricultural Education. They

Table 5. Means and Standard Deviations for Statements Regarding Science Credit for Agricultural Education

Statement	M*	SD
If Agricultural Education classes could provide science credit for course offerings, our guidance department would advise more non-college bounds students to enroll in these courses.	3.51	0.99
The course content offered in an Agricultural Education class provide valuable college preparation.	3.31	0.91
College bound students would be more interested in taking Agricultural Education courses if they counted as science credit needed for graduation.	3.28	1.05
The course content of our Agricultural Education classes could fulfill course requirements for some academic courses.	3.22	1.09
If Agricultural Education classes could provide science credit for course offerings, our guidance department would advise college bounds students to enroll in these courses.	3.07	1.02
Agricultural Education classes should be allowed to count for science credit needed for graduation.	2.95	1.18

*1= Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree

Table 6. Correlations Between Counselor Perceptions of Program Quality and Other Program Perceptions

Statement	r	p
Agricultural Education courses are primarily intended for the non-college bound students.	-0.192	.038*
Our Agricultural Education teachers are as effective in their teaching ability as our academic teachers.	0.563	.0001*
Students who take Agricultural Education courses tend to be less academically able.	-0.345	.0001*
Parents of college-prep students are reluctant to have their children enroll in Agricultural Education classes.	-0.216	.018*
Agricultural Education courses develop skills needed for their employment in business and industry.	0.463	.0001*
Students enrolled in Agricultural Education courses receive benefit from these courses.	0.297	.001*
Agricultural Education teachers have positive professional relationships with academic teachers.	0.448	.0001*
Agricultural Education is valuable for all students, regardless of their academic ability.	0.109	.236
Agricultural Education reinforces and enhances learning in professional academic courses.	0.404	.0001*
Agricultural Education classes provide students with competencies they will need to succeed in college.	.363	.0001*
College bound students are not interested in taking Agricultural Education courses.	-0.250	.006*
Agricultural Education courses in our school would benefit college prep students.	0.359	.0001*
I am knowledgeable about the course content, objectives, and nature of instruction in our Agricultural Education classes.	0.237	.010*

(table continues)

Table 6. (continues)

Statement	r	p
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If a college bound student expresses interest in an Agricultural Education course, our guidance departments tend to advise him/her to enroll.	0.180	.050*
When scheduling conflicts occur, our guidance department tends to advise non-college bound students to consider enrolling in Agricultural Education courses as opposed to non-required academic courses.	-0.031	.744
When scheduling conflicts occur, our guidance department tends to advise college bound students to consider enrolling in agricultural education courses as opposed to non-required academic courses.	0.066	.486
Our guidance department tends to advise students, regardless of future college or work plans, to consider enrolling in Agricultural Education classes.	0.214	.023*
Our guidance department tends to advise students, regardless of academic record, to consider enrolling in Agricultural Education classes.	0.160	.090
Agricultural Education classes should be allowed to count for science credit needed for graduation.	0.194	.035*
College bound students would be more interested in taking Agricultural Education courses if they counted as science credit needed for graduation.	0.023	.802
The course content of our Agricultural Education classes could fulfill course requirements for some academic courses.	0.270	.003*
The course content offered in an Agricultural Education class provide valuable college preparation.	0.344	.0001*
If Agricultural Education classes could provide science credit for course offerings, our guidance department would advise more non-college bounds students to enroll in these courses.	0.047	.609

(table continues)

Table 6. (continues)

Statement	r	p
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If Agricultural Education classes could provide science credit for course offerings, our guidance department would advise college bounds students to enroll in these courses.	0.037	.691
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*significant at or below the .05 level

seemed to feel that agriculture teachers had a positive professional working relationship with colleagues. Although they were "undecided" about the quality of the local program and about offering academic credit for agriculture, the counselors were varied in their opinions.

Correlations indicated that those who perceived the local programs as being quality programs, supported the idea of science credit and the course content as being valuable to college bound students. The same conclusion may be reached concerning the practices of the counselors regarding the Agricultural Education program. Those who perceived quality in the courses were more likely to place students into the program regardless of the student's future work or college plans.

As a group, the counselors appeared to be uninformed about the programs offered in Agricultural Education. It is conceivable that this could be a reason why some counselors were not positive in their attitudes toward the program. However, caution should be exercised in making this conclusion. Poor quality programs probably play a role in the negative attitudes of some counselors.

Recommendations

1. High school agriculture teachers should be aware that guidance counselors' attitudes toward Agricultural Education depend on their attitude toward the quality of the local program.
2. Those who attempt to gain science credit for

agriculture should concentrate on ensuring the quality of the local program. They should also solicit the help and support of the guidance counselor.

3. Local agriculture teachers should make an effort to educate counselors about the programs offered through Agricultural Education
4. Teacher education programs and State Department of Education personnel should help local agriculture teachers assess and improve the quality of their programs.
5. The study should be repeated at the national level.
6. Further study should be done to determine the criteria counselors use in determining the quality of a local program.

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