

CAREER ASPIRATIONS OF SELECTED FFA MEMBERS

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Abstract

This descriptive study conducted in 2003 utilized random sampling techniques for accessing the 450,000 members of the National FFA Organization. The purpose of the study was to describe career aspirations of FFA members within, and related to, USDE career clusters, Supervised Agricultural Experiences, Career Development Event participation and career related demographic indicators. The study compared results to a similar study conducted in 1999. The data revealed that FFA members are busy with involvement in multiple sports and multiple clubs within their school and that a majority hold a job. FFA members across the nation consistently connect to agriculture with over half of all respondents reporting involvement in raising animals or crops as an SAE. The data revealed that FFA members strongly associate with production practices in agriculture through their involvement in FFA activities. Eighty-seven percent of all respondents aspire to some form of post-secondary education or technical training. One-third of all respondents indicated their first choice of careers within the USDE career clusters to be agriculture while health sciences received 14%. A recommendation is that the National FFA Organization develop activities and awards programs that emphasize skills and careers found within the broader life sciences industry.

Introduction

The agricultural education program has three integral, intra-curricular components: classroom and laboratory instruction, experiential learning through supervised experiences (SAE), and leadership and personal development through membership in the National FFA Organization (FFA) (Dailey, Conroy, & Shelley-Tolbert, 2001). Agricultural education has had a career focus for its students since the passage of The Smith Hughes Act in 1917 (Moore & Borne, 1986; Talbert, Vaughn, & Croom, 2005). This focus is restated today through the agricultural education mission statement, "Agricultural education prepares students for successful careers and a lifetime of informed choices in the global agriculture, food, fiber and natural resources systems" (National FFA Organization, 2004b). The FFA mission, "FFA makes a positive difference in the lives of students by developing their potential for premier leadership, personal growth, and career

success through agricultural education," supports the career focus of agricultural education (National FFA Organization, 2000, p. 6).

Membership in the National FFA Organization provides young people the opportunity to do something worthwhile, to excel in what they do, to receive appreciation for what they do, to be given responsibility, and to learn to be self-sufficient (Phipps & Osborne, 1988). As an example, there are presently 23 Career Development Events and 50 Proficiency Award Areas that provide FFA members a vehicle to connect classroom instruction and supervised experiences to career preparation (National FFA Organization, 2004a). However, agricultural education students may not always see this connection. Connors, Moore, and Elliot (1990) found that the barriers for agricultural education students not joining FFA included their level of interest in agriculture and perceptions on the future value of the FFA to their career.

Myers, Dyer, and Breja (2003) conceptualized the variables explaining student enrollment in agricultural education. Career-related items are sub-factors under three of the six variables. Gliem and Gliem (2000) using exploratory factor analysis and a national purposive sample developed models for factors that encouraged, discouraged, or would encourage students to join the FFA. A five-factor model including providing knowledge about the FFA, placing less emphasis on farming, and relating FFA experiences with getting a good job explained the motivating factors for students who would consider joining the FFA.

Theoretical Framework

Active membership in the National FFA Organization is open to all students enrolled in a secondary agricultural education program (National FFA Organization, 2000). However, total membership inconsistent with total students enrolled in agricultural education has confounded those closely associated with the National FFA Organization. Of an estimated 800,000 agricultural education students, only about 450,000 receive educational benefits as members of the FFA (Stagg & Staller, 1999).

Secondary agricultural education teachers have long perceived the benefits of membership in the National FFA Organization for their students. However, concern exists for the lack of perceived benefits of FFA membership for many of the students enrolled in agricultural education. Renewed discussions concerning the need for FFA and agricultural education have taken center stage in Volumes 71 and 72 of *The Agricultural Education Magazine* where questions posed clarified the need for public school agricultural education and the FFA in the 21st century.

Astin's involvement theory serves as the theoretical framework for this study. Astin (1984) theorized that involvement in activities, especially those closely associated with academic outcomes, enhances achievement. In a later study, Astin (1993) looked at college undergraduates and found

that involvement enhanced both academic and personal development.

Brown and Theobald (1998) found that involvement in extracurricular or co-curricular activities can strengthen connections across learning environments. They cited literature throughout the 20th century praising the benefits of extracurricular or co-curricular activities especially in fostering citizenship, moral development, academic development, and community involvement. Brown and Theobald emphasized that these activities may have the most benefit for students who are disengaged from regular classroom instruction. In fact, they strongly recommended that extracurricular or co-curricular activities involve all students in order to break down barriers among adolescents.

From an occupational perspective, student involvement in career preparation activities is theorized to lead to more informed, more appropriate career selections. Students age 15-21 develop vocationally through role-playing, occupational exploration in school, and engaging in part-time work (Super et al., 1957). Super et al. (1957) discussed the school as a place that allows for formal exploration of careers through courses, clubs and organizations, and other activities. Super, Starishevsky, Matlin, and Jordaan (1963) also stated that adolescents age 15-17 develop their vocational goals through a cognitive process. Although the cognitive process occurs within the student, parents and others significant to the student, counselors and teachers, resource material, and situational factors influence this process. Vocational exploratory experiences that have the purpose of providing students information about themselves or their environment or allow them to try out or test hypotheses regarding careers can aid in the career development process (Super, 1957; Super et al., 1963). Consequently, participation and involvement in agricultural education, especially the career development aspects of FFA and SAE, may have a positive impact on members' career development processes.

Purpose/Objectives

The purpose of this study was to describe career aspirations of FFA members. Specific objectives of the study included:

1. Describe career aspirations of FFA members within the agricultural education and FFA career based programs of USDE career clusters, SAE participation, and CDE participation, and career related demographic indicators.
2. Compare results from this study to those obtained from a similar 1999 study for the identification of possible trends.

Methodology

The population of the study consisted of the more than 450,000 students enrolled in secondary agricultural education programs with membership in the National FFA Organization in 2001. The sampling frame was the mailing list for the *FFA New Horizons Magazine*. A random sample of FFA members from each of the 50 states in the National FFA Organization was utilized. To ensure sufficient respondents from each state a combination of sample size selection techniques was utilized. For states with FFA membership below 2,000, Cohen's (1988) tables for determining sample size was used. This technique was used to ensure that no state had less than 50 FFA members in the sample. For states with FFA membership of 2,000 to 20,000, a sample size of 100 FFA members from each state was used. For states with FFA membership greater than 20,000, the formula of 10 times the number of variables was used, which resulted in 250 FFA members from each state. Although this method statistically over-sampled smaller states, it was determined that this would provide large enough numbers from each state to provide valid data. The overall sample size of 5,000 allowed for generalizations to the entire population of FFA members.

The Tailored Design Method (Dillman, 2000; Salant & Dillman, 1994) for

enhancing response rate was utilized. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained for research conducted on human subjects. The survey technique was a bi-modal model (Fraze, Hardin, Brashears, Haygood, & Smith, 2003) of a web-based instrument followed by a mailed paper-based instrument to non-respondents. Data collection lasted for approximately six months. A useable response rate of 25.4% was obtained.

The survey consisted of a self-administered electronic or mailed questionnaire. Both versions of the questionnaire utilized the same questions. The questionnaire consisted of 70 questions relating to respondents' demographic information and attitudes towards school in general, their future aspirations, and their perceptions of their agricultural education coursework and FFA involvement. There was a combination of Likert-type statements asking respondents to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with the specific statement, yes/no questions asking students to circle the response that most closely indicated their beliefs or situation, statements asking for participants to select only the most appropriate response, and statements asking participants to select all of the answers that applied to their personal situation.

The questionnaire was modified from a 1999 National FFA Organization study (Balschweid & Talbert, 2000; Talbert & Balschweid, 2004) by adding questions and rewording questions that appeared confusing. Face, content, and construct validity was established with the assistance of management at the National FFA Organization. The instrument was pilot tested by a population of members of the National FFA Organization who were not included in the study. Reliability was established post-hoc using Cronbach's alpha from the Likert-type responses and ranged from .65 to .78. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings, conclusions, and recommendations of this article apply only to the population of respondents and should not be generalized to other populations.

Findings

Basic demographics for the respondents are presented in Table 1. Results from a 1999 National FFA Organization study (Balschweid & Talbert, 2000; Talbert & Balschweid, 2004) are provided as a comparison. The 1999 study was a mailed questionnaire to 500 FFA members with a

52% response rate. The percentage of FFA members identifying themselves as White declined slightly from the 1999 study (94% to 92%). The age range represents those ages found in middle school and high school. Because of the sampling frame used, college-aged members also are represented. The age range distribution is similar to that obtained in the 1999 study.

Table 1
Demographics of Selected FFA Members

Category	Response	FFA Members		1999 Study
		<i>n</i>	%	%
Student Ethnicity	White	984	92.0	94.0
	Hispanic	26	2.4	1.8
	Multiracial/ Other	23	2.2	1.4
	Black	16	1.5	1.8
	Native American	15	1.4	0.5
	Asian American	6	0.5	0.5
Age	14 or younger	72	6.7	4.5
	15	217	20.2	18.2
	16	262	24.4	23.2
	17	236	22.0	20.5
	18	156	14.5	20.4
	>18	130	12.2	13.2
Gender	Male	498	46.2	56.4
	Female	580	53.8	43.6
Parents/Siblings in AgEd/FFA	Yes	710	66.2	68.5
	No	363	33.8	31.5
4-H Member	Yes, current/former	585	54.9	48.8
	No	481	45.1	51.2
Type of Area ^a	Rural	421	39.8	84.0
	Suburban/Urban	540	51.0	14.2
	City	97	9.2	1.8
Household size	3 or fewer	318	29.6	25.3
	4 or more	757	70.4	74.7
Family Income Level ^b	Below Average	225	21.1	16.4
	Average or Above	843	78.9	83.6
Self-Reported GPA	GPA	1003	3.19	3.22
Participation in Activities	Participated in any Activity	780	72.2	89.6
	Sports	666	61.6	73.0
	Clubs other than FFA	747	69.1	74.2
	Church Youth Group	549	51.0	53.2

^a Rural includes farm and non-farm. Suburban/Urban defined as area with subdivisions, many stoplights, and lots of stores. City defined as area with little open space except for parks, one or more shopping malls, is one of most populated areas of the state.

^b Self-reported. Below average defined as receiving free/reduced lunch. Average or above average defined as not receiving free/reduced lunch.

There were more female (53.8%) than male (46.2%) respondents. This is a difference from the 1999 study, which had more male respondents. Two-thirds of the respondents had a parent or sibling who had been in agricultural education/FFA. This is similar to the results from the 1999 study (68.5%). More than one-half of the respondents were current or former 4-H members.

The questionnaire utilized in the 1999 study asked FFA members whether they lived on a farm or in a rural, urban, or city area. In that study, 84% of the respondents said they lived either on a farm or in a rural area. For this study, 51% of respondents said they lived in a suburban/urban area defined as an area with subdivisions, many stoplights, and many stores. Household size stayed consistent with the 1999 study with 70% of respondents living in a household with four or more people including themselves. The percentage of FFA respondents with a family income level

below average (21.1%) was higher than that of the 1999 study (16.4%).

Reported participation in activities for FFA respondents declined from 1999 to 2003. In the 1999 study 90% of respondents participated in at least one of the listed activities, whereas in 2003 the percentage was 72%. Participation in sports dropped the most of any activity from 73% to 62%.

Table 2 shows the career-related demographics of the respondents. Respondents in 2003 were less likely to have held a job in the previous year (72% vs. 62%) or planned to hold one in the current year (87% vs. 74%). A new question asked for 2003 was whether the participant had volunteered for a non-profit agency such as Humane Society, Habitat for Humanity, Red Cross, or a local hospital. Approximately one-third of the respondents had volunteered their time during the previous school year. FFA respondents in 2003 had similar overall college attendance plans as 1999 FFA respondents.

Table 2
Career-Related Demographics of Selected FFA Members

Category	Response	FFA Members		1999 Study
		N	%	%
Held a Job ^a	Previous School Year	663	61.8	71.8
	Current School Year	795	74.2	86.8
Volunteered ^a	Yes	385	35.9	N/A
	No	686	64.1	N/A
Plans after H.S. ^a	Attend 4-Year College	637	59.7	61.9
	Attend 2-Year College	189	17.7	13.5
	Attend Tech School	107	10.0	9.8
	Get a Job	69	6.5	8.8
	Married (no work outside home)	4	0.4	N/A
	Join Armed Services	61	5.7	4.6
Career Choices	Agriculture & Natural Resources	340	33.7	
	Health Science	139	13.8	
	Education	83	8.2	
	Architecture	73	7.2	
	Business	67	6.6	
	Manufacturing	67	6.6	
	Law	60	5.9	
	Arts	40	4.0	
	Scientific Research	36	3.6	
	Human Services	27	2.7	
	Information Tech.	23	2.3	
	Transportation	17	1.7	
	Retail	11	1.1	
	Government	9	0.9	
	Hospitality	9	0.9	
Finance	8	0.8		
Motivator for further education ^a	Getting a job	447	42.2	40.3
	The ability to make things better	224	21.1	17.6
	Independence	143	13.5	10.4
	More options	126	11.9	10.0
	Self-enrichment	52	4.9	4.5
	Follow footsteps of someone	36	3.4	1.8
	My parents/ family	24	2.3	1.4
	Peer pressure	6	0.6	0.0
Social status	2	0.2	0.5	

^a Based on questions asked in the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans annual *State of Our Nations Youth* survey of high school students. Available online at <http://www.horatioalger.com>

Respondents' career choices were organized by the 16 career clusters as recognized by the U.S. Department of Education (National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium, 2004). The cluster titled "Agriculture and Natural Resources" included secondary agriculture teacher. One-third of the respondents have plans to enter a career in agriculture and natural resources. The health sciences career cluster, which includes doctors, had the next highest percentage of respondents.

FFA members were asked to identify their greatest motivator to continue their education beyond high school. Two-fifths of the respondents identified getting a job as their highest motivator. This is similar to results obtained in 1999.

Table 3 shows the involvement levels of the FFA respondents in the FFA organization. More than one-half of the respondents had received their Chapter FFA degree. Almost one-half had served as a chapter, district, or state officer. Almost one-third of the respondents had never participated in a Career Development Event (CDE), while another one-third had participated in a state-level CDE. Respondents were asked to report their highest level of participation in a leadership CDE such as public speaking or demonstration. More than 40% reported that they had never participated in a leadership CDE. More than half of the respondents indicated attending a state FFA convention while a third indicated attending a National FFA Convention.

Table 3
FFA Involvement of Selected FFA Members

Category	Response	<i>n</i>	%
Highest Degree	Discovery	84	8.4
	Greenhand	287	28.7
	Chapter	435	43.5
	State	154	15.4
	American	41	4.1
Highest Office	Never held a committee membership	339	31.5
	Committee member	149	13.8
	Committee chair	63	5.8
	Chapter officer	449	41.7
	District officer	50	4.6
	State officer	27	2.5
Highest Level of CDE Participation	Never participated in CDE	333	31.1
	Chapter CDE	116	10.8
	District CDE	185	17.3
	State CDE	332	31.0
	National CDE	104	9.7
Highest Level Leadership CDE Participation (e.g., Public Speaking, Demonstration)	Never participated in leadership contest	467	43.5
	Chapter leadership	162	15.1
	District leadership	246	22.9
	State leadership	162	15.1
	National leadership	36	3.4
Leadership Event Participation ^a	Never Participated	312	28.9
	Chapter Activities	525	48.6
	State Level events	398	36.8
	State Convention	577	53.4
	MFE, EDGE, ALD	238	22.0
	Nat'l FFA Convention	361	33.4
	WLC	57	5.3
Highest Proficiency Award	Never completed proficiency award application	557	52.1
	Chapter proficiency	276	25.8
	District proficiency	89	8.3
	State proficiency	115	10.8
	National proficiency	32	3.0

^a Respondents selected all that apply

Respondents were asked to select in which leadership events they had participated. Almost 30% of respondents reported they had never participated in the listed events. National events listed were MFE (Made for Excellence), EDGE (Experiencing Discovery, Growth, and Excellence), ALD (Advanced Leadership Development), and WLC (Washington Leadership Conference). Almost one-half of the respondents had participated in leadership events at the chapter level, and more than one-half had attended their respective state's FFA convention. One-third reported they had attended the National FFA Convention. More than one-half of the respondents reported they had never

completed a proficiency award application, while one-fourth reported that the chapter-level was the highest for which they had submitted a proficiency award.

FFA members were asked the types of Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) they currently have (Table 4). Three-fourths of the respondents reported they had an SAE in one or more of the four categories. More than one-half reported a production entrepreneurship (raising an animal or growing crops) or placement (working for a farmer or business) SAE. An agribusiness entrepreneurship (lawn care business) was reported by 15.6% of respondents and an agriscience or experimentation (conducting experiments on plant growth) SAE by 9.6%.

Table 4
Types of SAE of Selected FFA Members

Category	Response	N	%
Any SAE	Yes	802	74.2
	No	279	25.8
Production Entrepreneurship SAE	Yes	600	55.7
	No	477	44.3
Placement SAE	Yes	555	51.7
	No	519	48.3
Agribusiness Entrepreneurship SAE	Yes	167	15.6
	No	904	84.4
Agriscience or Experimentation SAE	Yes	102	9.6
	No	964	90.4

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The conclusions, implications, and recommendations for the study are presented in this section. Because of the low response rate, these only apply to the population represented by the respondents. This study can provide baseline data for comparison by future studies. Although the low response rate limits generalizability, the response size (~1,000) represents the largest such national study found in the literature to date.

Engagement

Similar to the 1999 study, FFA members are involved in career preparation through holding a job during the current and previous years. In addition, FFA members reported involvement in two sports and, on average, almost 2.5 clubs other than FFA during school. More than two-thirds of the FFA members surveyed held a leadership position in their FFA chapter, seven in ten participated in a career development event at some level, and 60% were involved in a

career development event focusing on leadership skills. FFA members are busy individuals.

Given that the self-reported grades of FFA members are above a "B" average, it is evident that FFA members are cognizant of the need to be well rounded, not only achieving good grades in the classroom, but also participating in a number of extra curricular activities as well. Add to that, over one-third reported volunteering in some capacity for a non-profit organization or agency during the past year, and it can be concluded that many FFA members realize the benefits of being actively engaged in their school and community. The involvement theory (Astin, 1984; 1993) supports the conclusion that students who are engaged in FFA are also achieving academically.

Connection to Agriculture

Two-thirds of the respondents in the 2003 study indicated that a member of their family had been involved in agricultural education and/or FFA in the past. In addition, over half of the respondents indicated that they were either currently a 4-H member or had been one in the past. Finally, when asked for the type of Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAE) they participated in, over half indicated *Production Entrepreneurship SAE* which included raising animals and/or growing crops.

Similar to the 1999 study, this implies that FFA members have close connections to agriculture. This also implies that there exists a core of traditional agriculture students who are encouraged to join and participate in FFA based upon previous family members who have experience with agricultural education and the National FFA Organization. Although this provides FFA with a marketing tool that requires little input, it can be limiting to the broader audiences that may find FFA membership and participation beneficial but are not related to anyone with experience in agricultural education or FFA involvement.

Consistent with the conclusions and recommendations found in the 1999 study, there continues to be a core of FFA members who are directly involved in

agriculture, therefore it is recommended in the effort to broaden the scope of FFA that traditional aspects of FFA not be deemphasized to the detriment of these students. An additional recommendation is that the National FFA Organization look for methods of promoting the organization and agricultural education in general beyond the traditional audiences to include students who do not have any previous experience with agriculture and its related organizations. Furthermore, it is recommended that the National FFA Organization develop proficiency awards, career development events, and other programs to prepare young people in jobs requiring a knowledge of the food, fiber, and natural resource systems that will employ them in professions in the life sciences.

Aspirations

When considering future plans, 87% of FFA members aspired to some form of post-secondary education or technical training. Less than 10% indicated a desire to enter the workforce directly out of high school.

When asked to select their preferred career choices from the sixteen career clusters identified by the United States' Department of Education the category *Agriculture* was the clear favorite with one-third of the respondents selecting this career field. *Health Sciences* was the only other career cluster to receive more than ten percent of the selections. *Education, Architecture, Manufacturing, Business, and Law* were the only other career clusters to receive more than a five percent response. When asked for their motivation for seeking further education after high school, FFA respondents indicated *getting a job* was their primary motivation. Therefore, agricultural education and FFA are appropriate avenues for students to explore careers, especially those in the career cluster "Agriculture and Natural Resources" (Super, 1957; Super et al., 1957; Super et al., 1963).

The data reveal that students in agricultural education and the FFA are identifying with careers in science related fields with almost half of all respondents interested in categories related to life sciences. However, less than 10% of respondents reported having an agriscience

or experimentation SAE. The researchers recommended highlighting information on science-related careers and creating promotional material to capitalize on the interest students currently not involved in agricultural education have with careers in life sciences in general. This could help those students make connections between their desired career aspirations and agricultural education (Gliem & Gliem, 2000; Myers et al., 2003). There is the potential that some students and parents who choose not to participate in agricultural education and the FFA do not make the connection between a foundation in this program and the opportunities for careers in life sciences available in today's marketplace. The researchers further recommend that the leadership of the National FFA Organization strongly enhance the visibility and viability of the agriscience related programs. Visibility is essential if agricultural education programs are to attract broad audiences. Leadership must place concerted emphasis on a solid foundation in agriculture and on the skills needed for success in life science related careers.

FFA Involvement by FFA Members

All respondents to the study had experience with agricultural education and were FFA members. In addition, over 74% indicated they had an active SAE program. The majority of respondents held the *Chapter FFA Degree*, while *Greenhand FFA Degree* and *State FFA Degree* recipients ranked second and third.

Almost one-third of respondents indicated they had never held an office or been a member of a committee. A similar number responded that they had never participated in a Career Development Event (CDE). Over 40% had never participated in a CDE targeted at leadership development. Almost three in 10 reported never participating in a leadership event of any kind regardless of the location whether it was at the chapter, state, or national level. And, over half of all FFA members had never filled out a proficiency award.

These findings imply that many members are not experiencing *Premier Leadership, Personal Growth, and Career*

Success-the mission of the National FFA Organization. The data do not clearly reveal if students are not being afforded these opportunities, if they have access to these opportunities and are not participating, or if they are disenfranchised with the local program opportunities they have available to them.

The researchers recommend further studies to examine reasons for member disengagement. Specifically, research should focus on the breadth of opportunities available at the local level to determine if a diverse set of activities are available that would appeal to a diverse group of students. If opportunities only exist in one or two areas of agriculture, some students may be turned off, unwilling to participate in events they deem outside of their interest area, or unable to attend based on other criteria.

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