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AUTHOR Croom, Barry; Flowers, James L.
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether Future Farmers of America (FFA) members and non-members differed in their perception of FFA programs and services and whether their perceptions were influenced by gender and ethnicity, enrollment choice, prior enrollment in an agricultural class, block scheduling, grade level, and extracurricular activities. A questionnaire was administered to 404 first-year students enrolled in the Agriscience Applications course in 27 high schools in North Carolina. Participants responded by indicating the strength of their agreement or disagreement with 18 statements regarding FFA's programs and services. Statistical analyses included the Pearson Product Moment Correlation and multivariate analysis. Findings indicated a student's decision to join or not join the FFA was influenced by his/her perception of the image of FFA programs and services; a student's gender, ethnicity, enrollment choice, prior enrollment in an agriculture class, block scheduling, grade level, and extracurricular activities did not influence his/her perceptions of FFA programs and services. Students tended to join and participate in FFA when they believed it was able to meet a student's need for a sense of belonging. The social aspects of the organization were motivating factors in students' desire to be FFA members. (Contains 11 references.) (YLB)

Factors Influencing A Student's Perception of the Programs and Services Offered by a Career and Technical Education Student Organization

By
Barry Croom, Assistant Professor
Agricultural and Extension Education
North Carolina State University
Box 7607 NCSU
Raleigh, North Carolina 27695-7607
Telephone: 919.515.1759
Facsimile: 919.515.9060

And
James L. Flowers, Associate Professor
Agricultural and Extension Education
North Carolina State University
Box 7607 NCSU
Raleigh, North Carolina 27695-7607
Telephone: 919.515.1758
Facsimile: 919.515.9060

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to determine if there is a difference between FFA members and non-members as to their perception of FFA programs and services, and to determine if students' perceptions of FFA programs and services are influenced by gender and ethnicity, enrollment choice, prior enrollment in an agriculture class, block scheduling, grade level and extracurricular activities.

Data were collected using a questionnaire administered to 404 students enrolled in the Agriscience Applications course in 27 schools in North Carolina. It can be concluded that: A student's decision to join or not join the FFA is influenced by their perception of the image of FFA programs and services. A student's gender, ethnicity, enrollment choice, prior enrollment in an agriculture class, block scheduling, grade level and extracurricular activities do not influence their perceptions of the FFA programs and services.

The implications are significant for the FFA and agricultural education in that students tend to join and participate in the FFA based upon the organization's ability to meet a student's need for a sense of belonging. The FFA should continue to seek ways to involve all members in positive personal growth activities that allow students to experience that sense of belonging. Based upon the responses of members, the social aspects of the organization were motivating factors in their desire to be members.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership and personal development is an important component of career and technical student organizations, and these organizations encourage students to develop life-essential skills such as citizenship and cooperation as part of their experience. Activities and programs are designed to compliment formal instruction in vocational education. This systematic program of developing leadership, citizenship and cooperation in students is the essential purpose of career and technical student organizations.

Does the FFA, a career and technical student organization for agricultural education students, provide relevant programs and services to its members? In a review of selected FFA programs, it was noted that member participation had declined in North Carolina in selected career development events, scholarship programs, Agriscience student awards, and other individual award areas (North Carolina FFA Association, 1998). Because many FFA activities require student participation at the local level before advancing to state and national levels, this decline in state level participation may be indicative of less involvement by students in FFA activities at the local level.

The National FFA Organization and similar organizations in other states should consider membership numbers to be a potential predictor of a student's perception of the relevance of the organization (Sirkin and McDermott, 1995). If this is true, then the FFA must make substantial programmatic changes in order to more effectively satisfy students' interests and needs. One potential objection that may be offered by non-members is that FFA programs and services are not worth the financial investment one has to make in order to be an FFA member. Sirkin and McDermott (1995) contend that members will desire to maintain their membership in an organization if they perceive that it is worth at least the value of membership dues.

Although some non-members might offer the argument that they cannot afford the cost of FFA dues, it is important to note that FFA membership dues on the state and national levels have not significantly increased. From 1928 to 1969, the total cost for national FFA dues increased from ten cents per member to 50 cents per member. From 1969 to 1989, national FFA dues increased from 50 cents per member to $3.00 per member. North Carolina state association dues have increased in a similar fashion. From 1984 to 1995, state FFA member dues increased from $2.50 per member to $4.50 per member. In 1999, state and national dues were $4.50 and $5.00 respectively (North Carolina FFA Association, 1998). For these dues, an FFA member can expect to receive the official magazine of the National FFA Organization, The FFA New Horizons Magazine, an official membership card, eligibility to apply for FFA scholarships, eligibility to participate in FFA career development events, individual member awards programs and other local FFA activities and programs.

Maslow introduced the concept of self-actualization in his book, Motivation and Personality. Maslow believed that the human individual is an integrated organism. It is impossible to separate the various components of a person's self. When an individual experiences hunger, it is their whole self that is hungry and not just selected physiological components. It is the whole person that has the desire for food, shelter and safety.

Maslow's theory rests upon the idea that individuals progress through a series of stages during their lifetime. The stages are generally identified as physiological and safety needs, esteem needs, cognitive and aesthetic needs, and self-actualization. Even if all of the other needs are met, the individual will develop a sense of restlessness and discontentment unless he or she is accomplishing goals true to oneself. The individual must be true to his or her own nature and pursue goals that are true to his or her own nature (Maslow, 1970). Maslow suggested that an individual progresses through this hierarchy in the order described. However, the order may be rearranged as a result of an individual's experiences. By suggesting this, Maslow recognized the biological and social bases of human motivation (Weiten, 1989).

Maslow's Hierarchy is relevant to this study in that it offers a basis for understanding potential reasons why students join and participate in youth organizations, namely the FFA organization. If students are motivated by a sense of belonging, a desire for status, and a need to feel important, then this theory may explain why students tend to join and participate in the FFA organization.

Shinn and Vaughn (1993) found that the national FFA organization should develop new career development events based upon emerging student interests and agricultural technologies. Furthermore, they recommended that recognition programs should be periodically reviewed to determine their effectiveness in motivating students and the FFA should continue its efforts to promote ethnic and gender diversity in its membership. Finally, the study found that the national FFA organization should develop strategies for encouraging participation at all levels of the organization: local, state and national.

Wingenbach and Kahler (1997) found that a positive relationship existed between a student's perception of his or her leadership and life-skill ability and participation in FFA leadership activities. In addition, Turner and Herren (1997) concluded that agricultural education students who join the FFA had a higher need for achievement, affiliation and power than non-members did. Furthermore, African American students had a higher need for power, achievement and affiliation than Caucasians and others. Female agricultural education students had higher needs for affiliation and power than their male counterparts.

Rossetti, McCaslin, and Gliem (1996) examined the factors influencing students' decisions on whether to become FFA members. Students who were members of the FFA reported that assistance in achieving future career goals and other goals, interest in FFA activities and programs and the enjoyment derived from them, and leadership skill development were major reasons for being member. Non-FFA members responded in the study by saying that they did not have enough time for FFA activities and having more important things to do as major reasons for not joining the FFA.

One major reform initiated in recent years is the implementation of block scheduling in high schools. Becton (1996) investigated the impact of block scheduling on FFA programs and activities and found that teachers believe that block scheduling has a deleterious effect on FFA member recruitment and retention. Communication between

teachers and students not currently enrolled in agriculture classes was identified as a major problem. Wortman (1997) found that students who did not serve in official leadership positions in the local FFA chapter had no significant positive or negative perception regarding block scheduling and its impact on FFA activities. Students who served as FFA officers reported that block scheduling negatively influenced student participation in FFA activities.

The traditional method of delivery for FFA programs may influence the non-traditional student's decision to participate in these programs. Sutphin, Newsom-Stewart (1995) found that males were influenced to enroll by peer pressure more than females, and were more apt to study agriculture in order to escape academic courses such as foreign language. Females were more inclined to enroll for the purpose of developing the team and life skills emphasized by FFA (Sutphin, Newsom-Stewart, 1995).

Garton, Thompson and Cano (1997) found that a majority of students preferred introversion, sensing, feeling and judgment learning preferences. Conversely, teachers preferred active learning as evidenced by extroversion, intuitive, thinking and judgment learning preferences. They concluded that while teachers focus on achievement and competition, many students tend to avoid competition. Teachers who use FFA competitive events as a recruitment and retention strategy may need to proceed with caution. The structure of FFA competition is such that some students may be discouraged from joining the FFA.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the study is to determine the factors influencing a student's decision to join or not join the FFA. The specific research questions are:

1. Is there a difference FFA members and non-members as to their perceptions of the effectiveness of FFA programs and services to meet an individuals needs for premier leadership, personal growth and career success?
2. Are students' perceptions of FFA programs and services influenced by gender, ethnicity and FFA membership status?
3. Are students' perceptions of FFA programs and services influenced by enrollment choice in an agriculture class, prior enrollment in an agriculture class and FFA membership status?
4. Are students' perceptions of FFA programs and services influenced by block scheduling and FFA membership status?
5. Is there a relationship between a student's grade level and their perceptions of the value of FFA programs and services?
6. Is there a relationship between the number of clubs and formal athletic activities in which a student participates and their perceptions of FFA programs and services?

METHODS

The population for this study is first year students of agricultural education who were enrolled in the Agriscience Applications course in North Carolina schools. This was the first opportunity that these students should have had to experience FFA programs and services. Four hundred and four students were selected for the study based upon the geographic region in which their school is located. Schools selected for this study all had FFA chapters and were categorized as having 33% or less FFA membership, 34-66% membership, or 67-99% membership. An equal number of schools were selected in each membership percentage category.

Because this is descriptive research, a questionnaire was developed based upon a series of FFA program characteristics. Participants were asked to respond by indicating their agreement with a series of 18 statements regarding FFA programs and services. The response choices and their numerical values are as follows: Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1, and Do Not Know = 0. The midpoint of this scale was 2.5, and all mean scores above this number were interpreted be in agreement with the item. All mean scores below 2.5 were considered to be in disagreement with the item and items with a mean score of 2.5 were interpreted to represent a neutral opinion.

The scaled items were derived from the objectives of the FFA Local Program Success Model (National FFA Organization, 1997a). The Local Program Success Model was created and developed by experts in agricultural education for the purpose of improving local agricultural education programs. The researcher's graduate advisory committee, as a panel of experts in agricultural education and FFA, identified additional items to be included in the survey instrument and modified some items derived from the Local Program Success Model. The instrument was field tested and yielded a Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.83.

The data were collected and tabulated using Microsoft Excel® and transferred to the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 8.0.0® for Windows®. The first procedure involved an analysis of descriptive statistics in order to have a clear profile of the sample. Descriptive statistics were generated for gender, ethnicity, grade level, prior enrollment, enrollment choice, block schedule characteristics of the school, FFA membership status, and number of clubs in which survey respondents held membership.

A multivariate analysis was used to examine the 18 items on the questionnaire simultaneously and if differences were determined to exist between FFA member and non-member perceptions, one-way analyses of variance determined which items accounted for the overall differences.

Prior to any multivariate analyses, the dependent variables were compared using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation statistic to determine if a significant correlation existed between the scaled items on the survey instrument. Hotelling's Trace was the statistic used to determine the level of significance in each multivariate analysis. The next procedure involved a multivariate analysis of variance test to determine if students' perceptions of FFA programs and services were influenced by selected demographic and school characteristics as described in research questions two through four. For those multivariate analyses that yielded significant differences in the main effects of

independent variables, a one-way analysis of variance was performed to pinpoint any significant differences.

In addition, the Pearson Product Moment Correlation statistic was used to answer research question five by determining if a relationship existed between the grade level of students and the students' perception of FFA programs and services and question six by determining if a relationship existed between the number of clubs in which students were members and their perceptions of FFA programs and services.

RESULTS

The majority of study participants in the 27 schools involved in the study were males, constituting 76 % of the data sample. In all, there were 308 males and 96 females in the data sample. Females comprised 22.6 % of the members and 24.5 % of the non-members in the study. Of all participants in the study, 41.5 % indicated that they were FFA members and 58.5 % were non-members. Two hundred ninety nine Caucasian students and 102 non-Caucasian students participated in the study. Because of the low numbers of certain ethnic groups in the sample population, all ethnic groups except Caucasian were combined for data analysis.

Freshmen made up only 51.7 % of the students in the survey while seniors comprised only 5.7 % of the sample. With respect to club participation, 34% of respondents indicated that they were not members of any club or school organization and did not participate in any kind of extracurricular athletic sport. More FFA members participated in clubs and athletic activities than non-members.

Participants in the study were also asked to provide data regarding their choices in signing up for Agriscience Applications. The majority of students reported that they signed up for the class by their own free will and that this was their first agriculture class. Eighty nine percent of the students in this study report that their school is on a block schedule system.

A multivariate analysis was performed using as the dependent variables the items on the instrument designed to measure students' opinions of FFA programs and services. The independent variable was FFA membership status. This analysis yielded a Hotelling's Trace value of 0.210 ($p<.05$). Therefore, a significant difference exists between FFA members and non-members with regard to their opinions of FFA programs and services.

Table 1 shows the responses of members and non-members with respect to their opinion of the effectiveness of FFA programs and services in meeting their needs for leadership, personal growth and career success. Most FFA members in the study agreed with the concept that the FFA teaches necessary leadership skills, producing a mean score of 3.18 ($SD = 0.51$) for this item on the instrument. FFA members agreed in their opinions as to the effectiveness of the FFA in teaching communication skills, although the mean score for this item was slightly less at 3.15 ($SD = 0.60$). Furthermore, the

majority of FFA members agreed that traditional FFA leadership topics such and parliamentary procedure and public speaking were interesting, producing a mean score for this item of 2.73 (SD= 0.81). Non-members rated leadership topics such as parliamentary procedure and public speaking lowest among this series of items (M=2.5, SD=0.84). The most favorable response from the non-members was in the FFA organization's ability to help students learn communication skills (M=2.90, SD=0.67). Table 1 reports the responses of students to the FFA programs and services items related to leadership development.

Both FFA members (M=3.17, SD=0.58) and non-members (M=2.93, SD=0.71) in the study rated the ability of the FFA to help people with their educational goals highly, although non-members in the study reported a significantly lower opinion of the FFA's ability to help students with their educational goals (M=2.93, SD=0.71), and with the concept that FFA can help students improve their grades in school (M=2.62, SD=0.73). The FFA members reported that FFA programs offer a great opportunity for travel (M=3.16, SD=0.59). For the majority of members, FFA programs build self-confidence (M=3.13, SD=0.58) and recognize members for their achievements (M=3.00, SD=0.68). Finally, members agreed with the idea that the FFA helps students improve their grades in school (M=2.92, SD=0.77). Furthermore, non-members in the study reported significantly lower opinions of the FFA organization's ability to offer important personal growth opportunities through its travel (M=2.84, SD=0.76) and award programs (M=2.66, SD=0.77).

The FFA members in the study agreed with the idea that the FFA does indeed help students make career choices (M=3.25, SD=0.52). Furthermore, FFA members in the study reported that the FFA helps students to made better decisions whether it involves school or career choice (M=3.10, SD=0.67). Although still somewhat positive, non-members in the study provided significantly lower mean scores in their opinion that the FFA helps students make better academic and career choices (M=2.90, SD=0.68).

Table 2 describes students' responses on the questionnaire with regard to their overall perception of FFA programming. FFA member's opinions did not rank very highly in this particular section when compared to their scores on previous items. The FFA members agreed that FFA activities were held at a convenient time and location(M=2.72, SD=0.73) and that these activities were adequately publicized (M=3.03, SD=0.73). The non-members in the study held significantly lower opinions of the idea that FFA activities are held at a convenient time and location (M=2.51, SD=0.81) and were well publicized (M=2.80, SD=0.80).

There were no significant differences identified in the interaction effects between FFA membership status, gender and ethnicity. FFA membership status and prior enrollment and enrollment choice in an agriculture class had no significant effect the opinions of students. A school's block scheduling status did not significantly influence the respondents' opinion of the FFA programs and services. Furthermore, the interaction effect of FFA membership status and block scheduling did not yield significant differences.

Table 1
Perceptions of Members and Non-Members Regarding FFA Leadership, Personal Development and Career Development Programs.

Survey Instrument Items	Members (n=168)		Non-Members (n=236)		F
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	
The FFA provides help in choosing a career.	3.25	0.52	2.98	0.64	17.41*
The FFA teaches leadership skills necessary for success in life.	3.18	0.51	2.89	0.74	16.13*
The FFA helps people with their educational goals.	3.17	0.58	2.93	0.71	11.18*
The FFA offers students with a great opportunity to travel.	3.16	0.59	2.84	0.76	16.78*
FFA activities help students learn to communicate better.	3.15	0.60	2.90	0.67	11.63*
The FFA helps students be more self-confident.	3.13	0.58	2.96	0.71	5.34*
FFA activities help students made better decisions regarding school and work.	3.10	0.67	2.90	0.68	6.47*
FFA members get a lot of attention when they win awards.	3.00	0.68	2.66	0.77	16.38*
FFA activities help students improve their grades.	2.92	0.77	2.62	0.73	11.18*
The FFA leadership topics like parliamentary procedure and public speaking are interesting.	2.73	0.81	2.50	0.84	5.63*

*p<.05.1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree

Table 2
Perceptions of Members and Non-Members of Overall Programs and Services.

FFA Personal Development Items	Members (n=167)		Non-Members (n=236)		F
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	
FFA activities seem to be well organized and publicized.	3.03	0.73	2.80	0.80	6.95*
The FFA encourages students to get a job in the agriculture industry.	2.97	0.68	2.90	0.67	0.95
FFA activities such as contests are too complicated for me.	2.96	0.82	3.14	2.67	.058
FFA activities are held at a convenient time and location for me to attend.	2.72	0.73	2.51	0.81	5.15*

*p<.05. 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree

A Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient of 0.08 (p=.13) for the correlation between perceptions of FFA programs and services and the respondent's grade level was generated. Based upon these results, there is not a significant relationship between the respondents' grade level and their opinions of FFA programs and services. Another Pearson Product Moment Correlation was computed to test the significance of the relationship between the respondents' level of participation in other school organizations on their opinions of FFA programs and services. A correlation coefficient of 0.09 (p=.15) for FFA programs and services were generated. There was no significant relationship found between the respondents' level of participation in other school organizations and their opinions of FFA programs and services.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion 1: A student's decision to join or not join the FFA is influenced by their perceptions of the effectiveness of FFA programs and services in their school.

FFA programming makes a difference in a student's decision to join the FFA. In general, FFA members' responses to items related to the effectiveness of FFA programs and services were significantly more positive than the responses of non-members. However, it must be noted that non-members did perceive some FFA programs and services to be of value even though they chose not to become members.

Conclusion 2: A student's gender and ethnicity do not influence their perceptions of FFA programs and services.

Students' responses to items on the questionnaire were not significantly influenced by gender and ethnicity. The FFA has developed numerous recruiting materials in recent years that not only represent the current ethnic and gender characteristics of the membership, but also portray what FFA membership could be if it were more diverse in ethnicity and gender.

Conclusion 3: Voluntary enrollment in an agriculture class and prior enrollment in an agriculture class does not influence a student's perceptions of the FFA programs and services.

This study did not find that student's enrollment choice or prior enrollment in an agriculture class made a significant difference in their decision to join or not join the FFA. Students who are involuntarily enrolled in an agricultural class may not necessarily be adverse to joining the FFA, just as students who voluntarily enroll in an agriculture class are not necessary motivated to join the FFA.

Conclusion 4: Block scheduling does not influence a student's perceptions of FFA programs and services.

Once considered to be an obstacle in the planning and implementation of FFA activities (Becton, 1996), block scheduling did not influence students' decision to the extent that it either encourages or discourages membership. North Carolina schools have been utilizing block scheduling for a number of years, and perhaps FFA advisors have begun effectively recruit and retain FFA members under the system. Because a low number of students were on a traditional schedule, it would be imprudent to generalize the results of the analysis of this research question to the entire population of students that were enrolled in Agriscience Applications in the spring of 1999.

Conclusion 5: Grade level does not influence a student's perceptions of the FFA programs and services.

Grade level does not appear to be a factor in predicting student participation in FFA programs and services.

Conclusion 6: The scope of participation in school clubs and formal athletic activities does not influence a student's perceptions of FFA programs and services.

The scope of participation in school clubs and organizations might be effective in characterizing the students who might join and participate in FFA activities, but it does not singularly affect a student's opinions of FFA programs and services.

The results of this study are supported in the literature by Maslow (1970). At an age when most students are becoming eligible for FFA membership, they are also entering a period of human growth and development characterized by a need for contact, intimacy and a sense of belonging. The implications are significant for the FFA and agricultural education in that students tend to join and participate in the FFA based upon the organization's ability to meet a student's need for a sense of belonging. The results

of this study indicate that non-members often agreed with members in their assessment of FFA programs and services. Apparently, there must be a very highly perceived value of programs and services in order for students to join the FFA. The FFA should continue to seek ways to involve all members in positive personal growth activities that allow students to experience that sense of belonging. Based upon the responses of members, the social aspects of the organization were motivating factors in their desire to be members.

Overall, FFA members believed that the FFA provides valuable assistance in helping students choose a career and also helps students help achieve their educational goals. Many of the programs and services offered by the FFA are designed to encourage individuals to succeed. For students motivated by achievement, FFA activities are available that are challenging and can maintain a high level of interest without being unattainable. For those students that are motivated by a desire to avoid failure, the FFA provides programs and services with multiple difficulty levels so that students do not become discouraged. As a result, the FFA might wish to commit resources to the development of new products and services that more closely parallel students' interests and needs.

Non-members generally held a lower opinion of FFA programs and services than FFA members. Perhaps the slow evolution of FFA career development events and other awards programs in North Carolina has caused the FFA to fall behind in technology, therefore driving away students who might otherwise be interested in becoming a member. The FFA organization may be able to recruit new members if they offer activities that meet and exceed the expectations of non-members. FFA organization's educational programs could be revised to permit a closer relationship with instruction in the agricultural sciences. Learning activities could be packaged in a way that creates value beyond the cost of FFA membership dues.

The findings that emerged from this study led to certain recommendations pertaining to future research. Additional research is suggested in the area of FFA programs and services. An in-depth study into the various programs such as career development event, proficiency awards, and scholarships, would identify potential areas of weakness. Although FFA members indicated that FFA programs and services helped them reach their educational and career goals, additional research is needed to determine which programs are more effective.

To assist with recruitment and retention, additional research should be conducted into determining the most effective methods for planning and implementing FFA activities. These results might be particularly useful to teacher education responsible for preparing agriculture teachers for field service.

One general recommendation emerged from this study. It is recommended that the National FFA Organization create within its business structure a research and development division. The purpose of this new division would be to constantly evaluate the effectiveness of the FFA in achieving its mission and goals, and to provide research findings to state FFA associations and state agencies responsible for agricultural education programs. Regardless of the method employed by the National FFA

Organization, it is essential that an ongoing evaluation process be in place and operational.

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Organization/Address: Agricultural and Extension Education
Box 7607 NCSU Raleigh NC 27695-7607

Telephone: 919.515.1759 FAX: 919.515.9060

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