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Factors Influencing or Discouraging Secondary School Students' FFA Participation

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Modern adolescents are faced with a variety of choices regarding how to spend their free time. As recruitment and increased student participation continues to be a major priority of the National FFA Organization, it is essential to explore the reasons why students make the choice to become or not to become a member of FFA. This study was a part of a larger, collective case study of members and non–members in school–based agricultural education programs located in ten small town, rural, and urban fringe schools across Illinois. The purpose of the study was to explore what influences students' decision to join or not join the National FFA Organization. Students in this collective case study participated in semi–structured focus group interviews, individual interviews, and completed questionnaires. Four themes emerged as reasons to join FFA and three themes emerged as major reasons non–members elected not to participate in the FFA. Implications and recommendations concerning marketing of and recruitment for FFA programs were discussed.

Keywords: FFA; school–based agricultural education; youth development; adolescent youth

Introduction

Positive youth development is a crucial element in maintaining a progressive society (Lerner, 2009). Numerous youth development activities have been established in a variety of contexts to provide "healthy" opportunities for youth to cultivate positive experiences and develop life, career, and personal skills (Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2008; Morrissey & Werner–Wilson, 2005). While from different disciplines and settings, many youth organizations share similar goals, structures, and benefits. For example, community youth organizations such as Boys and Girls Clubs of America or Boy Scouts of America aim to improve youth academic performance and pro–social behaviors while also cultivating youth–adult relationships (Caldwell, Baldwin, Walls, & Smith, 2004; de Kanter, 2001; Gilman, Meyers & Perez, 2004; Heath & Roach, 1999; Jones & Perkins, 2005; Rhodes, 2004). Organized athletic activities for youth are intended to develop skills such teamwork, work ethic, responsibility, and accountability (Lerner, 2009). Career and technical student organizations (CTSO's) are organizations associated with career technical education courses to enhance student's academic knowledge and employability skills learned in the classroom (Zirkle & Connors, 2003). The National FFA Organization (FFA) is a career and technical student organization which contains components emphasizing agricultural knowledge, citizenship, leadership, and life skills (Brown, 2002; Dormody & Seevers, 1994; Horstmeier & Ricketts, 2009; Larson, Hansen, & Walker, 2005; Miller, Anderson, Swafford, & Seibel, 2007; Wood, Larson, & Brown, 2009). FFA is currently one of the largest youth development organizations available in U.S. public schools providing numerous positive youth development opportunities to students enrolled in school–based agricultural education programs (National FFA Organization, 2010).

In the later 20th century FFA faced concerns about declining enrollment and narrow membership demographics. Changes made at the national level of FFA—including altering the organization name and programming available to student members—began in 1988 and have been continuously updated until the present day. These changes were intended to reverse the declining enrollment trend by expanding the image of FFA beyond production agriculture to attract a larger, more diverse group of students possessing a broad range of backgrounds and interests (National FFA Organization, 2010; National Research Council, 1988). From 2005 to 2009, FFA membership nationwide continually increased despite fluctuating student enrollment in school–based agricultural education courses (Brown, 2010). It must be cautioned, however, there was an overall *decrease* in the percentage of agricultural education students enrolled as FFA members during that same time period (Brown, 2010). Furthermore, less than 6% of all secondary school students in the United States were enrolled in school–based agricultural education from 2005–2009 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). Although FFA has increased its' number of members in recent years, FFA continues to serve a relatively small group consisting of rural to small town Caucasian students across the United States (Rayfield, Compton, Doerfert, Fraze, & Akers, 2008).

Failing to address issues related to FFA membership could result in potential consequences, including lost or reduced funding for local, state, and national FFA programs; restricted youth development opportunities offered by FFA; lower teacher salaries due to reduced responsibilities; and decreased support and maintenance of current programs (Hoover & Scanlon, 1991; National FFA Organization, 2010). Previous studies on enrollment and retention issues in FFA have shown factors for not joining include peer influence, lack of time or money, lack of student interest, and negative perception of the organization and/or the agricultural industry (Croom & Flowers, 2001; Hoover & Scanlon, 1991; Rayfield et al., 2008; Stoller & Knobloch, 2005; Talbert & Balschweid, 2004). Research focusing on current students' perceptions of and knowledge about FFA is warranted to continue serving youth audiences while also expanding FFA to provide development opportunities to students who have not experienced what FFA has to offer. Therefore, it is essential to understand what factors influence students' decision to join and not to join the National FFA Organization.

Theoretical Framework

The understanding of human development requires dynamic empirical examination to adequately explain human actions (Lerner, Lewin–Bizan, & Warren, 2011). The psychological, physical, and sociological influences should all be considered to appropriately investigate human behavioral phenomena (Lerner, Dowling, & Chaudhuri, 2005). The decisions of adolescents to participate or not participate in FFA was approached using a three dimensional model. Participation was evaluated in terms of youth motivation and need attainment (psychological), adolescent needs and opportunity (physical), and perceived benefits and influences for participation (sociological). To this end, participation was investigated along psychological, physical, and sociological concepts.

The psychological component of the theoretical model deals with three theories associated with youth program involvement and engagement: Maslow's hierarchy of needs, McClelland's theory on human motivation, and expectancy–value theory as espoused by Eccles and Wigfield (2002). The basis of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory proposes physical, physiological, and emotional needs are necessary for positive human functioning and are impossible to disconnect from one another (Maslow, 1970). Maslow believed needs progress at different levels and life stages; only after one set of identified needs has been satisfied can another level be identified and met. The very basic need of Maslow's hierarchy is concerned with physiological well–being. Once the need of physiological well–being is met, an individual can progress onward to aesthetic and ultimately self–actualized needs. Specific needs which are of specific concern for this study include safety, esteem, cognitive, and self–actualization needs due to the association these needs have with the eight features of settings and environments likely to promote

opportunities for positive youth development (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002). The eight features include: physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering, opportunities for skill building, and integration of family, school, and community efforts (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Boyle, 2002; Morrissey & Werner–Wilson, 2005).

Maslow's work has frequently been used as the basis for motivational studies under the assumption biological and physiological needs can motivate individuals to seek out opportunities in which their needs can be filled. FFA has been shown to provide the structure and opportunities for adolescents to realize and achieve personal goals and engage in meaningful activities, potentially fulfilling the individual's self–actualization, esteem, and cognitive needs (Croom & Flowers, 2001). In addition, FFA provides opportunities to achieve a sense of belonging and meaningful relationships, which deal with belonging needs (Anderson–Butcher & Conroy, 2002; Coleman, 1978; Gilman et al., 2004; Kelley, 2003; Maslow, 1970). Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides a similar framework to the eight conditions conducive to positive youth development. In order to consider adolescent development and motivation for participation, one must first consider how the physical, physiological, and emotional needs of adolescents are fulfilled.

A theorist of human motivation, McClelland (1985) proposed behavior as a function of the pressures of internal and external environments on the psyche that reveal themselves as motivation (McClelland, 1985). Motivation is of specific interest in youth organizations and is described in terms of needs for achievement, power, and affiliation. Previous studies on youth motivation have utilized McClelland's concept to investigate youth motivation to participate in youth organizations by addressing one of the three needs (Freeman, 1994; McClelland, 1985; Turner & Herren, 1997). McClelland (1985) provides a model to consider youth programming participation based on the needs of the individual student level and addresses the components of intrinsic motivators which impact subsequent behaviors. Whereas Maslow provides insight into thinking about participation as a means to fulfill general developmental needs, McClelland offers insight into what internal and external factors are influencing adolescents' decisions (McClelland, 1985).

Expectancy–value theory, a sub–theory of human motivational theory, is concerned with motivation for decision–making as a type of cost–benefit relationship (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002). Choices are influenced by perceived negative and positive benefits as well as perceived cost in time, energy, or other opportunities for engagement which are lost by choosing one option over another (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Stoller & Knobloch, 2005). The expectancy–value theory provided a framework in which to envision how adolescents internalized needs and subsequently made decisions about participation in youth programming.

The physical component of the model is concerned with adolescent development through the lens of positive youth development, life satisfaction, and sense of well–being. According to adolescent development theory, positive youth development occurs within a connected person–context regulatory process (Lerner, Brentano, Dowling, & Anderson, 2002). Positive youth development programs promote pro–social behaviors (Morrissey & Werner–Wilson, 2005; Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003), reduce truant behaviors (Anderson–Butcher, Newsome, & Ferrari, 2003; Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Hansen et al., 2003; Kelley, 2003; Mahoney, 2000), create conditions for "thriving" adolescents (Lerner et al., 2002), and enable the development of necessary skills and dispositions needed for productive adulthood such as initiative, positive self–image, and critical thinking skills (Burt, 2002; Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Granger, 2002; Hansen et al., 2003; Larson, 2000; Meeus, 1996).

The inclusion of life satisfaction and well–being corresponds to the psychological component discussed earlier because research on youth programs has been shown to promote positive cognitive functioning and adjustment (Fletcher, Nickerson, & Wright, 2003; Gilman et al., 2004; Huebner, Suldo, Smith & McKnight, 2004; Kelley, 2003). In particular, positive relationships with peers and adults were shown to be of significant value to healthier

psychological functioning in adolescent youth (Kelley, 2003). The importance of positive youth development, life satisfaction, and well–being emphasizes the connection between psychological components and the sociological components of youth programs.

The sociological component of the theoretical model provides some overlap between the physical and psychological aspects. A factor shown to have a large influence on student enrollment and participation in after–school programs has been peer and family influence. Peer and family can especially influence adolescents' youth program participation, especially when compounded by a programs' perceived image (Anderson–Butcher et al., 2003; Borden, Perkins, Villarruel, & Stone, 2005; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Fletcher, Elder, & Mekos, 2000; Huebner & Mancini, 2003; Ryan, 2000). Youth can be potentially influenced to join and participate in programs based on the reputation of the activities as well as how peers would react to knowing they had participated in a particular program (Borden, Perkins, Villarruel, & Stone, 2005). The same phenomena can be seen in FFA programming where the perception of benefits gained from a program and the image of the organization can effect student participation (Croom & Flowers, 2001).

Students will be influenced to participate in activities according to how well the activity aligns with a student's expectancy and task beliefs (Eccles et al., 2003; Stoller & Knobloch, 2005). On certain levels, the decision to participate in activities is individual and is based on intrinsic motivation, self–identity, or self–realization (Coleman, 1978; Mitchell, 1975). However, studies have identified previous participation (Borden et al., 2005; Morrissey & Werner–Wilson, 2005), quality of adult/staff interactions (Borden et al., 2005; Anderson–Butcher, 2003; Jones & Perkins, 2005), parental support and reinforcement (Anderson–Butcher et al., 2003; Fletcher et al., 2000) and peer groups impact how likely a student will participate in a program (Anderson–Butcher et al., 2003; Eccles et al., 2003; Ryan, 2000).

Psychological, physical, and sociological theories of human development attempt to explain factors that potentially influence or discourage youth to participate in any given activity. The current study is based on a combination of these theories in an attempt to holistically examine why students decide to participate or not participate in FFA programming. The theoretical model of the current study is displayed in Figure 1.

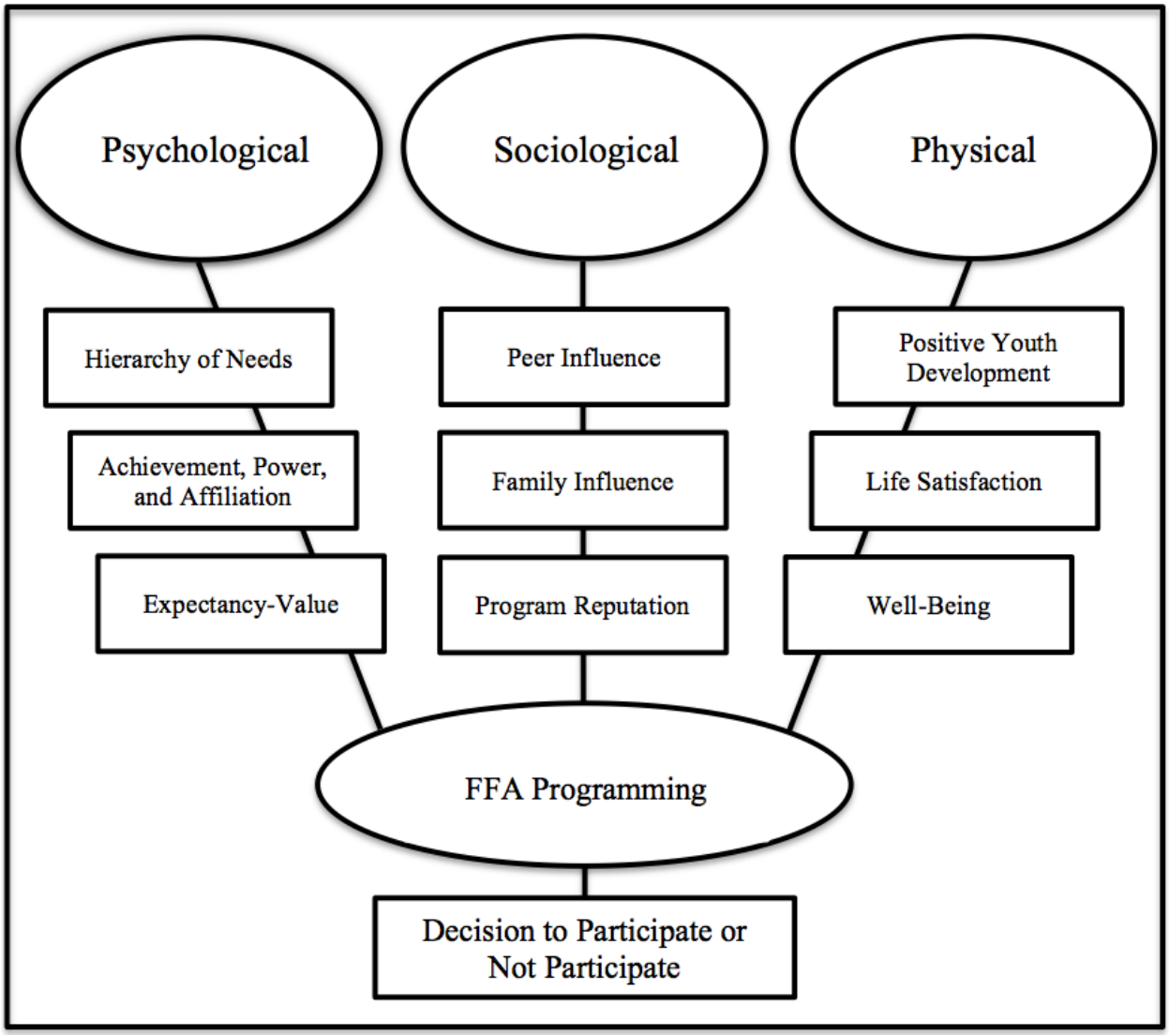

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of Factors Influencing Students' Decision to Participate in FFA

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to identify what influences students' decision to participate or not participate in FFA. This purpose was achieved by utilizing the following research objectives:

1. Explore the factors influencing youth to participate in FFA.
2. Explore the factors discouraging youth to participate in FFA.

Methods

This qualitative study was part of a collective case study investigation that utilized a combination of questionnaire and interview techniques as a multi–method approach to collect data (Fontana & Frey, 1994). The researchers used purposive sampling to identify schools with active FFA programs and student participants. Schools were identified through the Illinois Agricultural Education website by first searching for state–approved agricultural

education programs. A list of possible schools was populated to represent a diverse sample of community settings (small town, rural, & urban fringe), school enrollment, socioeconomic status, student ethnicity, school graduation rate, and number of FFA members. Fifteen schools were chosen by the researchers based on the reputation of the school for having a strong, comprehensive agricultural education program. Of the fifteen schools identified, two were uninterested in participating and three were unable to participate, leaving 10 schools as cases in this collective case study.

Twelve to twenty FFA members were chosen per school to complete focus group interviews, individual interviews, and questionnaires regarding their participation in FFA. Data were collected from groups of current FFA members and groups of non–FFA members at each of the 10 participating schools. FFA members were chosen at the discretion of the agriculture teacher(s) at each school to represent students in all grade levels who were currently involved with FFA chapter programming. Six to twenty–six non–FFA members were chosen per school to complete focus group interviews, individual interviews, and questionnaires regarding their non–participation in FFA. Non–FFA members were chosen through collaboration between the agriculture teacher(s) and non–agriculture teachers within each school. Non–FFA members were chosen at random from concurrent non–agriculture courses to represent all grade levels. A total of 170 FFA members and 154 non–FFA members compiled the final number of students completing focus group interviews, individual interviews, and questionnaires across all ten participating schools.

Participating schools had an average total school enrollment of 435 students between grades 9 through 12 and ranged from 132 to 954 students. Participating schools had an average FFA chapter membership of 77 students between grades 9 through 12 and ranged from 25 to 205 FFA members. Six schools were determined to be located in rural areas, 2 schools were considered to be located in a small town, and 2 schools were considered to be located in an urban fringe. FFA members were predominantly male (n = 112, 65.80%), were mostly White (n = 165, 97.00%), were largely in their freshman or sophomore years of high school (n = 105, 62.2%), and mostly identified themselves having a rural farm or rural non–farm home setting (n = 101, 59.50%). Non–FFA members were predominantly male (n = 87, 56.50%), were mostly White (n = 148, 96.10%), were largely in their freshman or sophomore years of high school (n = 95, 61.00%), and mostly identified themselves as having a small town home setting (n = 116, 75.20%).

The researchers executed data collection on–site during regularly scheduled agriculture classes at all ten schools. All 10 focus group interviews were each approximately one hour in duration and were semi–structured with questions aimed to provide a rich description of students' reasons for participating or not participating in FFA. Individual interviews were conducted to provide more in–depth exploration of the available data in member and non–member groups. Semi–structured individual interviews lasted 30 minutes to one hour each and were conducted after the focus group interviews. The study utilized data triangulation in order to provide a variety of data sources (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

The student and focus group interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and organized by school and group (member or non–member). All transcripts were analyzed using an open coding or generative analysis method (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Kerlin, 2002). More specific patterns were gleaned from the original impressions around themes of: participation influencers, described benefits, program perceptions, motivation for participation, and obstacles to participation. On the third read, the researchers refined the patterns built from the first two readings and noted student responses in support of those patterns. To ensure the believability and credibility of the findings, the researchers kept a reflexive journal, took field notes before and after the visits, directly transcribed the findings and kept a document trail, cross referenced the findings from the interviews with the questionnaire data, and met regularly with an advising researcher regarding the trustworthiness of the themes that emerged. It is important to note this study is qualitative in nature and findings cannot be generalized beyond the participants in the study. However, the findings can serve to enlighten other groups with similar characteristics as the participants.

Findings

Four major themes emerged from the findings in regard to why youth choose to participate in FFA: encouragement from others, personal gain, social component, and fun and travel.

Theme 1: Encouragement from Others

Students described a variety of reasons why they decided to participate in FFA. When asked how they had first heard about the FFA program and what made them want to join, students responded through friends, relatives, teachers or siblings. As one member stated, "all my friends were doing it and both my brothers did it." Another member said "my brother had [teacher name] and said she was really good and that it was a good thing to get into if I was looking at farming later on." The support of the family in students' decision to join was also reported as being a factor. Support was described not only in terms of deciding to participate but also in level of participation in activities. One member explained "if you've got someone there supporting you and appreciating the fact that you are doing something, trying to help and make something of yourself, it helps so much."

While family and friends provided motivation to join based on encouragement and suggestions, the teacher's impact on students' decision to join FFA was often reported while explaining the benefits of membership as a reflection of the teacher's reputation or camaraderie with students. The reputation and opinion of the teacher from siblings or past participants had an impact on a number of students' reasons for joining the program. "My brothers told me about Ms. [teacher name] and said she was really cool" was a sentiment common among many FFA members.

Theme 2: Personal Gain

Both members and non–members of FFA described they felt one of the best reasons to join the program would be the opportunity for personal gain. Members and non–members felt FFA provided personal gain in many facets including experiences to put on college application or résumés, developing a variety of skills, and getting out of school for FFA activities.

Common sentiments expressed by students in the member group were "I want to go into an agricultural career and that's the reason why I wanted to join. [FFA] gives me more background on it" and "this teaches you something you can use in an agricultural job." Many non–members acknowledged the potential benefits of participation in FFA. "It would look good on a college application" was echoed by a number of non–members. Discussions with members and non–members around FFA activities resulted in comments such as "I'm sure it would help in an interview" and "you meet people who will help you out…gives you connections in certain places."

Members and non–members noted they felt the FFA provided benefits to students who weren't considering an agriculturally–related career. Typical member responses would be similar to a sentiment expressed by a student who said "yes, you learn how to run things on farms, jobs and responsibility…how to talk to people, public speaking, getting motivation to work, and dealing with groups…being able to work with others." Students in the non–member group talked about general skills gained through FFA participation. This included comments such as "they do a lot of contests…you need to learn how to work as a team and talk to people" or "there's a lot of speeches and leadership stuff."

Non–members often focused on FFA programming as having only benefits for students with agricultural backgrounds or agricultural career intentions. "It's all farming kids…[to be a member] you need some ag background" and "if you're going into plants or something…plants, soil, farming…if you are going to own a farm you're going to need it" were common responses. Within comments like these was an awareness of the importance of learning general agriculture knowledge for career preparation.

Opportunities to develop professional and personal skills were reported as being influential when considering participation as well as a benefit gained from membership. Common skill areas discussed by both member and non–member groups included the development of communication, organizational, leadership, and social skills through specific FFA events and related activities. A member stated one of the biggest benefits she gained was being able to communicate and interact with others. "Like

going to Ag Legislative Day and meeting my representative…. having to shake hands with people and mingle…being able to have a conversation without getting nervous." A majority of non–members mentioned communication skills were gained as a result of contest judging and speaking. Members believed teamwork, work ethic, time–management and organizational skills were gained during FFA programming. "General life skills" was also a phrase used consistently in both member and non–member groups to distinguish skills learned within FFA programming. In the words of one FFA member, "I think you learn skills when you're in a group of people….like in class you learn facts and stuff, how to do things. In [FFA career development event] you learn more about teamwork and dedication …."

Theme 3: Social Component

The social component of FFA was a common description from members when asked what they liked about participation in FFA or why they continued to participate. Feelings of belonging and being a part of something important was voiced by a number of FFA members. One student stated he enjoyed being in FFA because the people are like him, "laid–back and easy going" and he feels welcomed and comfortable going to FFA events. "I go to the state fair and it's just a blast. You get to meet a whole bunch of cool people," stated one member when asked what they enjoyed about FFA.

The ability and opportunity to spend time with friends was mentioned by both members and non–members when discussing the reasons why they would join an organization or club. "I joined because my friend was in it…" or "I knew the people in it" were common sentiments echoed by a number of members. One member expressed "I wouldn't suggest joining to my friend if I wasn't in it," while another member stated "if I had to decide between two clubs…it'd be the people." Another member added they would have to consider "who's in it and what you're going to be doing." One member who transferred from a larger city explained "you get to meet a whole lot of great people from different places and it really helped when I was new to get to know the [agriculture] teachers and [FFA members] like that."

Theme 4: Fun and Travel

Members stated they had joined, and non–members stated they would consider joining FFA, because of the kinds of activities and experiences FFA provides. Many non–members found the frequency in which FFA members are excused from school for FFA events to be a perceived benefit of FFA membership. Both members and non–members reported the "fun activities" were a major influence and benefit to FFA membership. Numerous "fun" FFA activities were identified such as school petting zoos, milk–chugging or pie–eating contests as fundraisers, tractor pulls, community outreach events such as plant or bake sales, lock–ins, movie nights, or community breakfasts. While not always directly linked to agriculture, these FFA sponsored activities were highlighted by members and non–members as being engaging and interesting. Members who participated in such events highlighted them as being good opportunities to help out the school or local community, to get involved in the organization, and to meet people.

Over half of the non–members interviewed listed a benefit of FFA as learning outside the traditional classroom. Members and non–members often expressed travel as a major benefit for joining FFA as well as a means to learning outside the classroom. The benefits of getting out of the classroom and taking learning into different environments was recognized by members and non–members as a benefit or reason for joining.

Another benefit associated with leaving the classroom and engaging in outside activities was the opportunity for community engagement. Activities identified as the "most fun" to members involved community outreach activities. Members expressed they had received the most pride and sense of accomplishment from providing a service to the community or school rather than winning contests. In one example, four FFA members being interviewed spent ten minutes describing how they had helped raise money to provide three defibrillators for the school. "We gave the school three of those things…that was cool to see how we could help out like that." A summary of factors influencing participation in FFA is displayed in Figure 2.

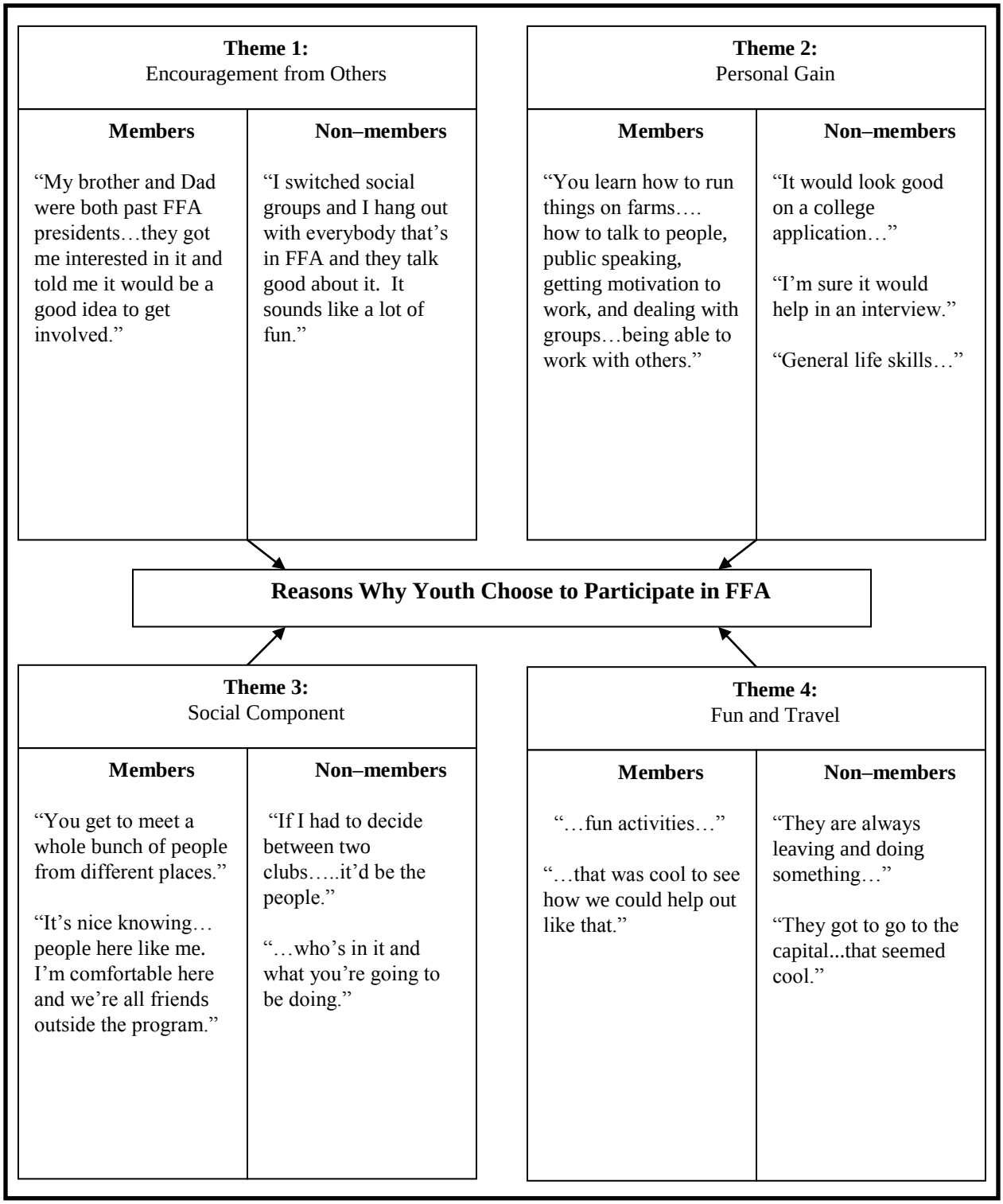

Figure 2. Summary of Factors Influencing Participation in FFA

Three major themes emerged for why students would not want to become involved in FFA including: negative perception, apathy, and scheduling.

Theme 1: Negative Perception

While most of the non–members interviewed recognized there might be other benefits to participating in FFA, there were still misconceptions about the program. "It's all farmers and hicks" and "it's a waste of time—I'm not going into agriculture" were common views expressed by non–members as reasons why they didn't join the FFA organization. One member explained "I think some of them [non–members] think we're lucky because we get out of class. But then some of them just don't like the program because they're not interested in ag and they just think it's a farmers club." Non–members discussed what they thought the program would be about. One non–member noted, "I decided to give it a chance, but I just wasn't interested in what they covered." Another non–member responded, "I thought it was just a blow–off [organization]." A different non–member stated he was asked to join but refused because "I'm a town boy. I'm never going to be a farmer so I don't need to know any of that…I wouldn't be able to put it to use later on in my life."

Theme 2: Apathy

Personal preferences and interests played a large role in student's motivation and decisions to join organizations. When asked if they had ever considered joining FFA, around half of the non–members explained they didn't join because they weren't interested, didn't care, or didn't see the value in participating. In the words of one non–member, "I just didn't think I'd be a useful member of FFA. I just don't like to do stuff." Non–members said FFA may take a lot of time coupled with increased course loads, making it difficult for students to participate in other non–FFA extracurricular activities. When members and non–members compared FFA to other school organizations, the consensus was FFA took a lot of time when compared to other school organizations. Some members found FFA to be limiting because it allowed participation in just one or two organizations. Many non–members believed high school was an opportunity to be less involved or "lazy" before entering college or the work force, which were believed to be points in life when individuals possess a higher level of responsibility. One non–member stated, "I'm just a lazy person. Not so much that I wouldn't want to do it [FFA], but I just figure I can be lazy. When you get to college you can't be lazy."

Theme 3: Scheduling

Personal preferences were not the only barrier to participating in FFA. Over half of students in both member and non–member groups mentioned the frustrations associated with finding time to fit an agriculture class, and subsequently FFA participation, into an already full class schedule. The assumption among many member and non–member students was the school requirements were increasing, it was getting harder to get into college, and school officials were trying to make more classes mandatory for students. More required courses left less room for electives courses, such as agriculture, and thus restricted students from participating in FFA programming. Non–members also felt like they didn't have enough free time outside of school to participate in the FFA anyway. Many of the non–members interviewed held part–time jobs, participated in athletic teams, or were involved in other activities, which prevented participation in FFA. A summary of factors discouraging participation in FFA is displayed in Figure 3.

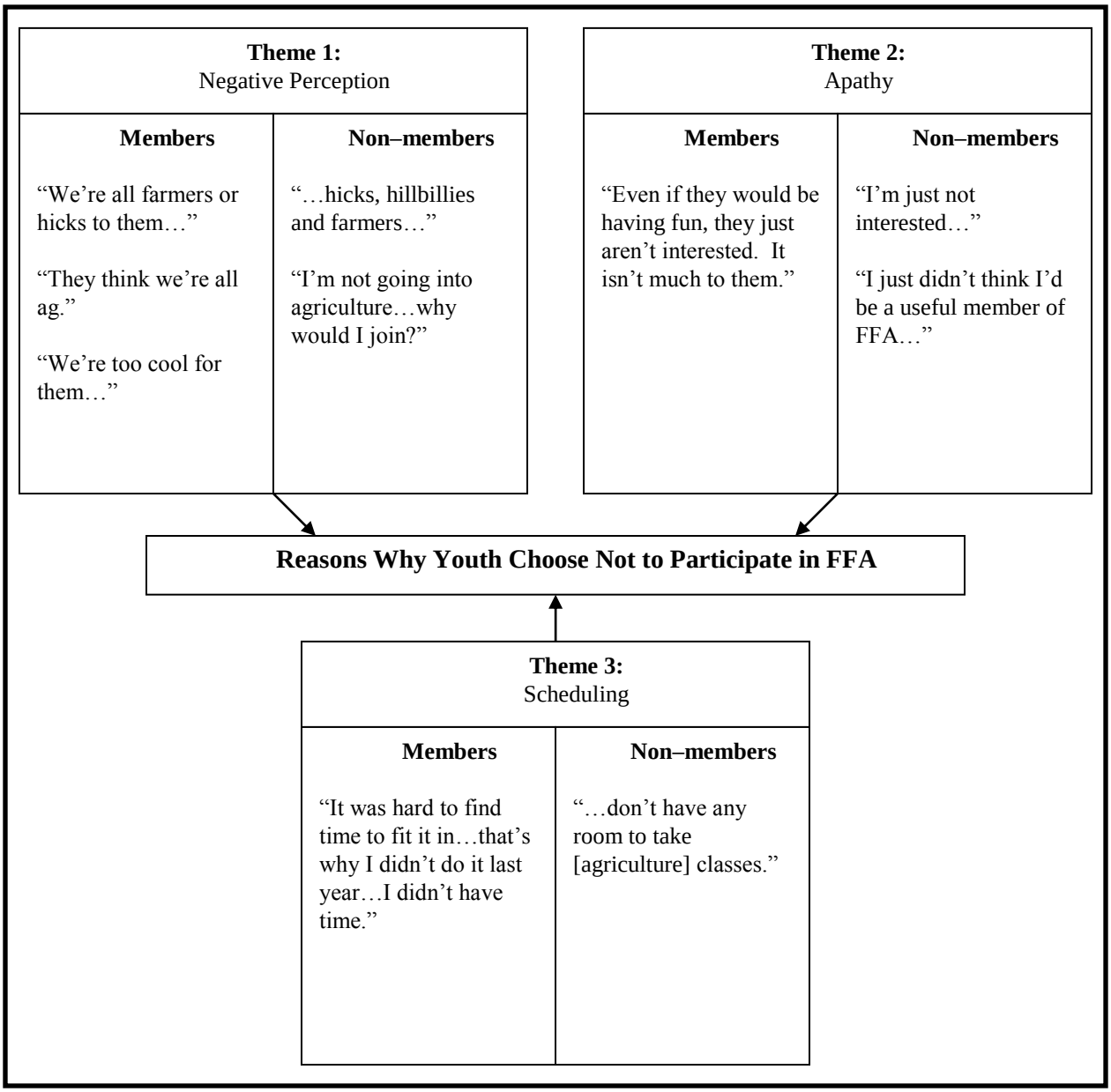

Figure 3. Summary of Factors Discouraging Participation in FFA

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

Students attributed participation in FFA to encouragement from classmates, friends, family, and/or school personnel; feelings they would personally gain from participation; social components and how *fun* they judge the available activities to be; and the structure of the FFA program. The greatest influences for non–participation included negative perception of the program, apathy towards FFA, and lack of time. As presented in the literature, previous studies have shown an awareness of, or interest in, agricultural issues to be a factor which has an effect on student enrollment (Gliem & Gliem, 2000; Myers, Dyer, & Breja, 2003; Stoller & Knobloch, 2005; Talbert & Balschweid, 2004). Other factors shown to impact student enrollment in youth development programs include a sense of belonging, peer groups,

parental influences, image of the topic or program, and perceived future value (Anderson–Butcher & Conroy, 2002; Croom & Flowers, 2001; Fletcher et al., 2000; Gliem & Gliem, 2000; Hoover & Scanlon, 1991; Larson, 2000; Ryan, 2000; Stoller & Knobloch, 2005).

While students in non–member groups expressed an interest in joining or participating in the FFA, scheduling was a major deterrent to participation for both members and non–members. The class requisites and lack of flexibility in planning course loads was a source of concern and frustration for program participation in both student groups. For members and non–members, lack of time was a big influence on whether an individual participated or not. Many students expressed it is hard to become involved with FFA programming due to no room to fit an agricultural class into an already tight schedule. This is not surprising because high school graduation requirements have continued to increase nationwide during the past two decades (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). This finding implies school–based agricultural education courses, and ultimately FFA programming participation, may become more difficult for students to schedule as graduation requirements increase. A struggle for course accommodation in schools will certainly be a challenge in the future if this trend continues. It is recommended that proponents of school–based agricultural education and FFA on the local, state, and federal level continue to express benefits of programming to these stakeholders. It is further recommended that agricultural teacher educators prepare future teachers to take on the challenge of promoting their local program to accommodate a broad range of individuals. Future research similar to this study could potentially "build the case" for the benefits associated with agricultural education and FFA.

The negative perception and stereotype of FFA has been a reoccurring issue in recent organization history. While the National FFA Organization has taken measures to broaden the scope of FFA programming and benefits to more diverse populations, many students interviewed believe FFA is still an organization for "farmers." As noted by the common response of non–members describing FFA members as *hicks*, *hillbillies*, and *farmers*, the production agriculture stereotype overshadowed the additional benefits gained from participating in agricultural youth programs. The implication made from this conclusion is that emphasizing all the benefits of FFA membership and inclusive recruiting of students could downplay negative stereotypes that impede participation. It is recommended that educators incorporate more inclusive marketing strategies to appeal to diverse student populations. The sociological aspect and benefits of participation can be utilized better in marketing to students for enrollment and recruitment. Students can be influenced to join organizations based on a friend's recommendation and/or presence. Agricultural teacher educators should make future teachers aware of these vital components to building and maintaining an effective FFA program which provides positive adolescent development to a broad range of students.

This study provided insight on the current state of youth perceptions and decisions regarding participation in the FFA. However, further research should be conducted on the linkages of youth motivation related to participation in FFA. Replication of this study in urban and suburban areas could shed more light on why students choose to become involved, or vice versa, in FFA. Continuing assessments detailing current perceptions, interests, needs, and wants of upcoming generations of adolescents could help maintain students' personal interests in our ever–changing society. From a broader view of adolescent development, further study into the structure, perceptions, and components of what would constitute an "ideal" youth development program for adolescent aged youth could strengthen the empirical base across multiple fields within education and positive youth development.

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