

Recruitment Strategies and Activities Used by Agriculture Teachers

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Abstract

The problem addressed by this study was the fluctuating enrollment numbers in agricultural education programs throughout the U.S., as related to the ineffectiveness (or lack) of a recruitment strategy by many agriculture programs. The objective of this study was to identify the most effective strategies and activities, as reported by successful teachers, for recruiting students into secondary agricultural education programs. A total of 275 agriculture teachers across the U.S. served as the sample for this study. The most effectively used and perceived beneficial strategies as reported by agriculture teachers were contacts with feeder schools, individual contact by the agriculture teacher and student contact with other potential students, utilization of the FFA, use of various publications (promotional brochures, videos, posters, bulletin boards, newsletters, newspaper, radio, television, and school announcements), a strong agriscience curriculum, use of support groups of the agricultural education program and the FFA chapter, and the use of special recruitment events. Specific activities within those strategies are summarized. It was recommended that teacher education programs utilize this information in planning and delivering preservice and inservice programs to teachers to assist them in developing and implementing recruitment plans.

Introduction

Enrollment in secondary agricultural education programs has fluctuated greatly over the past several decades (Breja & Dyer, 1999). Whereas a number of studies have been undertaken to examine ways to increase enrollment in post-secondary programs (Fanno & Cole, 1999), little has been done to study ways in which agricultural education professionals can stabilize the variation in student enrollment in secondary agricultural education programs.

Agricultural education serves only a fraction of those students who could be enrolled in this type of educational program. Although enrollments such as those of the late 1970s were impressive, agricultural educators have not been able to sustain a consistent pattern of growth. After experiencing peak enrollments in 1977 (National FFA Organization, 1998), enrollments declined by as much as 60% in the 1980s (Dyer & Osborne, 1994), but have rebounded to the earlier peak year levels during the past decade (Speer, 1998). According to the National Research Council (1988), agriculture is too important a topic to be taught only to a relatively small percentage of students. However, with fluctuating enrollments, that mandate is not being met.

The existing literature base in student recruitment into agriculture programs generally explores the reasons for enrollment patterns, or has focused on the barriers to enrollment in agricultural education programs (Breja, Ball, & Dyer, 2000; Conroy, 2000; Croom & Flowers, 2001; Gliem & Gliem, 2000; Hoover & Scanlon, 1991a; Marshall, Herring, & Griers, 1992; Reis & Kahler, 1997; Thompson & Russell, 1993). According to Marshall et al., factors that have been found to influence a student's decision to either enroll or not to enroll in an agricultural education course are the characteristics of the course, enhancement of personal identity, interest in the agricultural field, practical application of information in a future career, encouragement from significant others, and circumstantial or disavowance reasons. These findings would suggest that providing a strong agricultural education curriculum and informing both the students and those important to the student (i.e., parents, friends, siblings) about the agricultural education program should improve enrollment.

Other studies have examined the differences in needs and reasons for enrollment among minority groups (Bell & Fritz, 1992; Cano & Bankston, 1992; Jones & Bowen, 1998; Newson-Stewart & Sutphin, 1994; Sutphin & Newson-Stewart, 1995; Talbert & Larke, 1995; Turner & Herren, 1997). Several studies have shown that minority students are less likely to view agriculture as a career choice due to negative perceptions of agricultural education, the FFA, and the agriculture industry in general (Jones & Bowen, 1998; Talbert & Larke, 1995). These studies also found that different groups of people are motivated to enroll in courses and participate in activities by different forces. Sutphin and Newson-Stewart (1995) reported that males responded to social pressure to enroll more than do females. Also, females were more likely to enroll in agriculture courses to develop life and teamwork skills.

According to Dyer and Breja (2000), the major obstacles to the successful recruitment of students into agriculture programs are those associated with scheduling difficulties, guidance counselor support, competition from other programs and activities, image of agriculture, access to students, administrative support, and teachers having time to recruit.

Previous studies on recruitment strategies found the most frequently used activities to recruit new students as FFA related. Also found to be effective were visits by the agriculture instructor and contacts made by past and current agriculture students with prospective students (Hoover & Scanlon, 1991b). Both teacher educators and state agricultural education supervisors rank visiting prospective students as one of the top five summer activities for secondary agricultural education instructors (Swan, 1997; Swan & Cole, 1991). It was also reported that the use of media, such as newspapers, radio, and television, was viewed as the least effective by agricultural education instructors (Hoover & Scanlon, 1991b). Research on the effectiveness of various marketing methods for 4-H clubs found that word-of-mouth was the most effective strategy, while the use of tangible items such as book covers, bookmarks, and buttons was rated as the least effective method (Wingenbach et al., 2000).

Most recruiting strategies are grounded in cognitive theories of motivation and attribution. These theories suggest that a person's tendency to approach a new task is influenced by the probability of success and the attractiveness of achieving it (Nierman & Veak, 1997). In order for the student to assess their probability of success in a task, such as an agricultural education course, the student needs to be familiar with the task. Several studies have pointed to the negative image of agricultural education, the FFA, and agriculture in general held by many students as a major barrier to enrollment in agricultural education courses (Breja et al., 2000; Gliem & Gliem, 2000; Hoover & Scanlon, 1991a). This negative image reduces the attractiveness of enrolling in an agricultural education course. A more positive familiarity can be achieved in many ways. Some studies suggest that messages delivered through instructional media can have a significant effect on the intentions and/or actual behaviors of school children (Nierman & Veak, 1997). This instructional media could be presentations at elementary and middle schools. Other studies show no effect on behavioral preference due to increased familiarity or knowledge. Still some other studies show that although some instructional activities may influence behavioral intentions, these activities do not always provide sufficient motivation to change actual behavior (Nierman & Veak, 1997). These conflicting findings make the search for recruitment strategies that will improve the image of agricultural education and increase enrollment even more difficult.

The various reasons students choose to enroll in agricultural education courses are important to understand. Although there has been a scattering of research that identified what worked, or failed to work, in particular instances, no national study was found in the research base that targeted teachers who had been successful in recruiting and retaining students, and asked them for input on what recruitment strategies and activities they found to be most successful. This study sought to provide this gap in the research base. Knowledge of successful recruitment strategies and activities can be used by secondary agricultural education instructors to develop recruitment programs within their own departments that should assist in establishing a consistent pattern of agricultural education enrollment.

Purpose and Objective

The purpose of this study was to synthesize and delineate strategies for overcoming the obstacles to recruitment as outlined by Dyer and Breja (2000). The specific objective of this

study was to identify the most effective strategies and activities, as reported by successful teachers, for recruiting students into secondary agricultural education programs.

Methods/Procedures

The study used a descriptive survey design. The population for this national study consisted of secondary teachers of high school agriculture in all 50 states. In selecting the sample of respondents, members of state departments of agricultural education and university teacher educators were asked to nominate an expert panel of teachers from secondary agricultural education programs in their states to serve as the sample. Specifically, state staff and teacher educators were asked to nominate teachers from their state that were considered to be outstanding in their ability to resolve those problems associated with recruiting and retaining students. A total of 275 unduplicated nominees were provided from teacher educators and state staff.

The data-gathering instrument for this study was developed by the researchers as part of a larger, comprehensive study that also assessed practices and attitudes toward recruitment. Face and content validity were determined using an expert panel of teachers, teacher educators, and state staff not included in the study. Based upon recommendations of the panel, revisions were made to the questionnaire. The instrument was pilot tested using agriculture teachers who were not participants in the study. The portions of the instrument pertaining to this portion of the study were open-ended and short answer questions. Reliability as a measure of internal consistency on the attitudinal components of the instrument was calculated using the Spearman-Brown coefficient ($r = .69$).

Questionnaire packets were mailed to participants followed by a postcard reminder approximately two weeks later. A second questionnaire packet was mailed to non-respondents approximately four weeks after the first mailing. A total of 173 respondents completed the questionnaire for a response rate of 63%. Because of the nature of the information gathered from this instrument, it was determined that nonresponse error was not a factor in this study. Since the study sought to solicit responses that provided solutions to recruitment problems as identified by Dyer and Breja (2000), forcing a response from teachers who were either not interested in responding or who could provide no useful information would have yielded misleading and inappropriate data. Data were organized and analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Results

The objective of this study was to identify the most effective strategies and activities, as reported by successful teachers, for recruiting students into secondary agricultural education programs. The respondents listed several different strategies of activities in addressing recruitment obstacles as outlined in Table 1.

The most widely used, and perceived beneficial, strategies dealt with contact with the feeder schools. Feeder schools were defined by respondents as any elementary school, middle school, or junior high school whose students will attend the high school where the agricultural education program is located. Respondents identified such activities as conducting joint science projects

with middle school students, having high school students teach elementary school classes, establishing middle school agriculture programs, designing competitive events for middle school students, establishing a working relationship with middle school guidance counselor and administrators, and working with 4-H members at the elementary and/or middle school levels.

Individual and direct contact by the agriculture teacher with the student, and contact between one agriculture student with other potential students, was listed by teachers as the second most effective strategy to use in recruiting students. Specific activities used by teachers included individual student visits, letters to both students and parents, establishing a recruitment committee to serve as a front-line in making contacts, and student word of mouth to other students. Although this category ranked second, the practice of student word of mouth recruitment was the single most often effective practice listed by the respondents. Also, many of the activities listed in the high ranked strategy, feeder school contact, involved direct contact with students by the teacher. Therefore, several items in the first- and second-ranked strategies may overlap.

Respondents indicated that use of the FFA was the third most effective strategy to use in recruiting students and presented a positive recruitment opportunity. Specifically, value was noted in career development events (CDE), FFA officer and member presentations to various groups (elementary, middle, and high school students, teachers, and parents), recreational/social activities of the chapter, and the FFA banquet. Respondents indicated that the FFA offered an opportunity for marketing the program beyond that which existed through the normal instructional program of other subject matter areas.

Respondents listed the use of various publications as the fourth most effective recruitment strategy. Included as activities were the production and use of such items as promotional brochures, videos, posters, bulletin boards, newsletters, newspaper, radio, television, and school announcements. Respondents noted that it was important to publish accomplishments of the program, the FFA, and its members in media that is available to the general public and the general school population, which often means use of multiple media for distribution of the same information.

A strong agriscience curriculum was listed as the fifth most effective strategy to increase enrollment. A second benefit of this strategy is that it should also improve the image of the agricultural education program. In addition, the ability to offer communication skills and science credit for agricultural education courses was seen as a way to entice students to enroll in agricultural education courses.

The sixth most effective strategy identified by the respondents involved the use of various support groups of the agricultural education program and the FFA chapter. Respondents indicated the use of these groups to be very effective in the recruitment of new students. Involving parents of students in activities and working with other school employees to promote a more positive image of the agricultural education program was listed as activities that had proven to be successful by many of the respondents. Also, rewarding those who have been supportive by conducting such activities as appreciation breakfasts for teachers and administrators, or other special recognition events, was listed by numerous respondents as being effective.

Table 1

Effective Recruitment Strategies and Activities Used by Agriculture Teachers

Rank	Strategy	Activity
1	Feeder school contact	<p>Conducting joint science projects with middle school students</p> <p>High school students teach elementary/middle school classes</p> <p>Establish middle school agriculture courses/program</p> <p>Establish working relationship with middle school guidance counselor and administrators</p> <p>Design competitive events for middle school students (such as public speaking for individual grades)</p> <p>Work with 4-H members and other groups at the elementary/middle school level (i.e., grade poster contests, assist with club activities, etc.)</p>
2	Agricultural teacher – student contact	<p>Individual student contact/visits – personal visits, phone calls, etc.</p> <p>Establish a recruitment committee to plan and organize recruitment activities, and to serve as lead contact group</p> <p>Letters to students and parents – initial and follow-up letters</p> <p>Student word-of-mouth</p>
3	FFA chapter events	<p>Career development events</p> <p>Sponsor scholarships to events such as conferences, conventions, etc.</p> <p>Involve FFA Alumni in supervisory and/or instructional roles</p> <p>Establish a public relations program for the community (inclusive and extended)</p> <p>Build traditions; and build upon traditions</p> <p>Offer associate FFA membership to non-agriculture students to acquaint them with FFA</p> <p>FFA awards</p> <p>FFA officer and member presentations</p> <p>Recreational/social activities</p> <p>FFA banquet</p>

Table 1 (continued)

Effective Recruitment Strategies Used by Agriculture Teachers

Rank	Strategy	Activity
4	Publications	Brochure Video School announcements Radio Television Posters and bulletin boards Newsletter
5	Curriculum	Strong agriscience courses Communication skills credit Science credit Strong laboratory program for active and applicable learning Tours and trips Leadership and FFA component
6	Parents/Teachers/Support Groups	Alumni and advisory council support Working closely with guidance counselors (elementary, middle, and secondary school) Teachers' breakfast, administrators' breakfast Take parents and administrators to National FFA Convention
7	Recruitment events	Invite 8 th grade students to visit facility Information booth School assemblies Ag-Awareness night Conducting leadership/team-building workshops focusing on being a member of the FFA "team" Incentive trips Open house State and national FFA officer visits Parent orientation night Activities for other teachers in the school Recruitment programs for parents and students Cookouts, meal functions

The seventh category of strategies identified by the respondents was the use of special recruitment events. Though not often viewed by some to be as effective as those strategies previously listed, respondents expressed attitudes that events that focused solely on recruitment could be very effective.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

This study had one objective: to identify the most effective strategies and activities, as reported by successful teachers, for recruiting students into secondary agricultural education programs. The most effectively used and perceived beneficial strategies as reported by agriculture teachers were contacts with feeder schools, individual contact by the agriculture teacher and student contact with other potential students, utilization of the FFA, use of various publications (promotional brochures, videos, posters, bulletin boards, newsletters, newspaper, radio, television, and school announcements), a strong agriscience curriculum, use of support groups of the agricultural education program and the FFA chapter, and the use of special recruitment events. Specific activities within those strategies are summarized in Table 1.

Maintaining sufficient enrollments in agricultural education programs ensures an adequate supply of students for entry into advanced college and university programs, ensures an adequate supply of graduates for the agricultural industry, but more importantly, ensures that more students have the opportunity to benefit from the type of instruction that learning in the context of agriculture can supply (National Research Council, 1988). Based upon the number and percentage of students eligible to enroll in agriculture courses, as compared to those that actually enroll, the vast majority of students in the U.S. must acquire literacy in agriculture in other ways than enrollment in middle and secondary school agriculture programs. Whereas all students will likely never be able to be educated in and about agriculture via organized public middle and secondary school programs, the numbers can be greatly improved by utilizing effective recruiting strategies. The findings of this study offer suggestions to teachers and teacher educators for building a recruitment program using field-tested strategies.

It is recommended that teacher education programs utilize this information in planning and delivering preservice and inservice programs to teachers to assist them in developing and implementing recruitment plans. Marketing the agriculture program to students (recruiting) is an important component of a total agricultural education program. Without an effective recruitment program, enrollment numbers are likely to continue vacillate as described by Dyer and Osborne (1994).

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Recruitment Strategies and Activities Used by Agriculture Teachers

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This study explores ways to improve recruitment and enrollment in secondary agricultural education programs. The introduction sets the stage for the study by referring to previous work in this area. Prior studies focused on barriers to enrollment, negative perceptions of agricultural education as a career choice, and competition from other programs, to name a few. According to the authors, this is the first national study that focused on surveying agricultural science secondary teachers about successful recruitment strategies.

The purpose of the study was to determine strategies for overcoming the obstacles to recruitment by identifying the most effective strategies for recruiting students into secondary agricultural education programs. The authors used a descriptive survey design sent to nominated secondary teachers in all 50 states. Of the 275 teacher nominees, 173 responded. The instrument was pilot tested and found to have internal consistency. The questionnaire was open-ended with short answer questions. I was curious about the technique used to rank the items with the open-ended design. Did the authors use frequency in responses determined by analyzed categories? Table one suggests that the respondents listed activities under each strategy, but were the strategies predetermined on the survey or also open-ended responses? If they were open-ended, what methods were used to determine the categories?

The second most frequently used strategy was direct contact by the agriculture teacher and contact with other students. "Word of mouth" was listed as the most effective practice. That is probably true of many high school programs, but problems with variation in the quality and consistency/accuracy of information makes this an interesting challenge. What suggestions can you make to provide "training" to students enrolled in the program about their role as mentors and "recruiters" to help ensure "the right" information is getting out about the program to potential students?

I think the results in Table 1 provide a nice snapshot of some potential strategies and activities for recruitment, but I felt the authors could have provided more implications and recommendations to ensure that the purpose was met. Strategies that were ranked by teachers were discussed, but no advice for overcoming the obstacles to recruitment was given. The main obstacle to recruitment is finding the time to implement these strategies. I hope the authors will elaborate on this area during their presentation.

Thanks for sharing the results of your study with the profession.