

**Examining Agriculture Teacher Perceptions of Utilizing Volunteers**

Ashley Cromer  
Claymont City School District  
201 N. 3<sup>rd</sup> St.  
Dennison, OH 44621  
(330) 641-9160  
acromer.27@gmail.com

Kisia Weeks  
Utah State University  
2300 Old Main Hill  
Logan, UT 84322-2300  
(435) 797-1254  
kisia.weeks@aggiemail.usu.edu

Olivia Horning  
Utah State University  
2300 Old Main Hill  
Logan, UT 84322-2300  
(435) 797-5741  
olivia.horning@aggiemail.usu.edu

Michelle Burrows  
Utah State University  
2300 Old Main Hill  
Logan, UT 84322-2300  
(435) 797-5741  
Michelle.burrows@aggiemail.usu.edu

Tyson J. Sorensen  
Utah State University  
2300 Old Main Hill  
Logan, UT 84322-2300  
(435) 797-5741  
tyson.sorensen@usu.edu

Rebecca G. Lawver  
Utah State University  
2300 Old Main Hill  
Logan, UT 84322-2300  
(435) 797-5741  
tyson.sorensen@usu.edu

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### Introduction/Need for Research

Enrollments in school-based agricultural education (SBAE) programs in the United States have steadily increased over the past several years, placing more demands on teachers, agriculture programs, and those associated (Smith, Lawver, & Foster 2018). Aside from the responsibility of teaching and laboratory instruction, SBAE teachers also carry the role of advising an active FFA chapter, managing supervised agricultural experiences (SAE), fostering school and community partnerships, and more (Torres, Ulmer, & Aschenbrenner, 2008). Excessive work demand of SBAE teachers can lead to work-family conflict, burnout and teacher turnover (Croom, 2003; Sorensen, McKim, & Velez, 2016; 2017). One possible solution is the use of volunteers in SBAE programs. Evidence suggests volunteer utilization can contribute significantly in reducing teacher stress and burnout (Clary et al., 1998). Despite this, little research in agricultural education has been conducted to determine the perceptions of SBAE teachers towards using volunteers, and this study aims to do so.

### Theoretical Framework

The Ecological Systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) offers a theoretical viewpoint for understanding SBAE teachers' perceptions of volunteer utilization. The Ecological Systems theory posits human development and behavior are influenced by factors within different levels of environmental systems (i.e., individual, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem), and a hierarchy of factors, including perceived factors, influence behavior within an educational system. Therefore, perceived benefits or challenges within each hierarchal level can influence the SBAE teacher's behavior (i.e., utilization of volunteers).

### Methodology

This quantitative descriptive study was conducted using an online survey (Qualtrics) to assess SBAE teachers' perceived benefits and challenges of volunteer utilization within SBAE programs. A pilot study of SBAE teachers in two different states was administered before distributing the survey. Surveys were distributed to a random sample of SBAE teachers in the United States ( $n = 500$ ) during the 2017-18 school year, in which the frame was obtained from the National FFA Organization. A total of 134 usable surveys were collected, yielding a response rate of 26.8%. Using protocols suggested by Lindner, Murphey, and Briers (2001), we found non-response error to be insignificant. Participants were asked to respond to a series of benefit and challenges statements of utilizing volunteers by indicating on a six-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*) their level of agreement for each statement. The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). For reporting purposes, data from the six-point scale were aggregated into two categories (1-3 = *disagree*; 4-6 = *agree*).

### Findings

Of the 18 benefit statements, SBAE teachers perceived volunteers to be most beneficial in the areas of program advocacy (96.5% agree), community support (95.6% agree), and program

guidance (90.2% agree). SBAE teachers perceived volunteers as least beneficial in administrative/office support (42.3% agree), FFA awards applications (46.8% agree), and facility/equipment maintenance (58.9% agree). In terms of perceived challenges, respondents overall had a higher percentage of disagree than agree for every survey item. The system associated with volunteers (background check, direct oversight, policies) was the largest challenge associated with volunteer utilization, with almost half of the participants in agreement with the statement (43.9% agree), followed by the statements, “volunteers take too much of my time” (36.7% agree) and “volunteers try to take over my program” (36.6% agree).

### **Conclusions**

Advocacy, community support, and program guidance were perceived as the three greatest benefits of volunteer utilization, while site-based and program specific tasks were perceived as least beneficial. This finding suggests SBAE teachers recognize volunteers more as community advocates and partners and less as key personnel in the day-to-day operations of the program. Consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological theory (1993), SBAE teachers in this study identified the benefits of volunteers in the exo- and macrosystems, and less in the micro- and mesosystems (e.g., local program and school). With the heavy emphasis on advisory committees and community partnerships in agricultural education textbooks (Newcomb, McCracken, Warmbrod, & Whittington, 2004; Phipps, Osborne, Dyer, & Ball, 2008; Talbert, Vaughn, Croom, & Lee, 2007), it is likely that many SBAE teachers do not recognize the various opportunities for volunteers in the micro- and mesosystems of the program. Perhaps as SBAE teachers utilize volunteers more in the micro- and mesosystems of the program, stress, work-family conflict, burnout, and turnover intentions could be reduced (Clary et al., 1998; Croom, 2003; Sorensen et al., 2016; 2017). The fact that each of the challenge statements were met with disagreement, suggests SBAE teachers either do not perceive many barriers to volunteer utilization or they recognize the benefits of volunteers outweigh the challenges. Whatever the case, this finding is encouraging. The challenge most agreed upon by SBAE teachers was related to school and district policies, such as background check requirements. It is possible the reason SBAE teachers recognize the benefits of volunteers more at the community level (exosystem) is because of the perceived barriers that exist at the local program (microsystem) and school (mesosystem) levels.

### **Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession - Michelle**

Overall, this study shows SBAE teachers recognize the benefits of volunteers in their program at the community level, which seem to outweigh the possible barriers or challenges of using volunteers. These findings have implications for the National FFA Alumni suggesting that SBAE teachers are certainly willing to utilize volunteers, but mostly at the community level. Based on these findings, we urge teacher educators to expand the definition and scope of utilizing volunteers to more than just advisory committees and community advocates, but to expand upon the numerous opportunities for volunteers to engage in the day-to-day efforts of the program, much like elementary teachers utilize volunteers. We suggest additional research be conducted to determine the influence of specific demographic characteristics of SBAE teachers on volunteer utilization. The results of this study can be used to guide training and professional development in teacher education and teacher induction programs to ensure that new SBAE teachers are appropriately prepared to establish and manage volunteer programs.

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