

Utah Agriculture Program Perceptions of the FFA Affiliation Fee Program

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Introduction/ Need for Research

Membership in the FFA enhances student opportunities for positive youth development in the public school (National FFA Organization, 2018a). To be a member of the National FFA Organization, a student must be enrolled in a school-based agriculture education (SBAE) class, be a paid member of the local, state and National FFA, and participate in experiential learning through an SAE (National FFA Organization, 2018b). When successfully implemented into a program, the three-circle model of agricultural education gives students' ideal education. Traditionally, students have paid their own dues after enrolling in an agriculture education class, yet, many of these students do not join the FFA because they cannot afford the cost of FFA dues or do not see it as relevant (Croom & Flowers, 2001). Recently, the National FFA has developed an Affiliation Fee Program option, which allows for every student enrolled in SBAE to be paid members of the FFA, regardless of if they choose to actively participate or not. The affiliation membership is calculated on a sliding scale system where dues are computed according to the number of students enrolled in the SBAE program (State Supervisor, personal communication, February 1, 2018). This opportunity provides every agricultural education student in the local program the opportunity to experience the full benefits of the three-circle model of agricultural education (N. Crutchfield, personal communication, November 14, 2017). However, many students who cannot afford FFA dues, or do not pay dues in the fall, may become interested in the FFA later on in the school year. With the affiliation program all students have equal opportunity for involvement in the organization regardless of finances or involvement interests. Due to the Affiliation Fee Program being a National FFA research priority and the lack of literature surrounding the subject, there is a great need for research in this area. Currently, the Affiliation Fee Program in Utah is voluntary.

Theoretical Framework

Diffusion of innovations offers a theoretical viewpoint for understanding the adoption of the FFA Affiliation Fee Program. Roger's (1995) innovation-design process includes five stages: (1) knowledge, (2) persuasion, (3) decision, (4) implementation, and (5) confirmation. SBAE programs in Utah are at a variety of stages, while many have surpassed the knowledge and persuasion stage, only 13 programs have begun to implement and confirm the affiliation program.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine SBAE program perceptions of the benefits and barriers of the FFA Affiliation Fee Program. Two research questions guided this study: RQ1- What are the benefits of FFA affiliation membership as perceived by Utah agriculture programs? RQ2- What are the barriers of FFA affiliation membership as perceived by Utah agriculture programs? The target population for this study was all SBAE programs in Utah, convenience sampling was used and accessed through the Utah board of education. A survey was distributed to selected participants, which yielded a 51.5 % response rate ($n = 49$). Participants were asked to respond to questions about their SBAE program and demographic questions, as well as an open-ended question regarding the perceived benefits and barriers of the FFA affiliation program.

Findings

In the 2016-2017 school year 51,720 students were enrolled in agriculture education classes in Utah, while the Utah FFA Association had approximately 7,000 student members, 13 affiliated chapters, and 95 total FFA chapters (State Supervisor, personal communication, February 1, 2018). Nineteen of the total respondents determined cost was the largest factor prohibiting them from becoming an affiliated FFA chapter, in addition, 41% indicated that student interest and buy-in was a large factor. Respondents indicated that students who pay to become members of the organization feel they have more of an investment in the FFA, therefore they are more likely to be active members rather than those who did not pay their own dues. Additionally, teachers indicated that becoming an affiliated FFA chapter will not increase involvement because, as it stands, students who want to be in the FFA are already members, therefore paying for additional student membership fees is a waste of chapter funds.

Common themes identified from RQ1 included: *giving all students the same opportunities to participate and having less of a burden on teachers in terms of collecting FFA dues each year*. Nine percent of respondents indicated that being an affiliated FFA chapter allows for each student to have the opportunity to be a member of the National FFA Organization. Additionally, 6% of respondents felt another benefit of affiliation membership is the relief that comes from not collecting membership dues from each member on a yearly basis.

Two common themes emerged from RQ2: *cost of affiliation and student buy in*. Fifty-five percent of respondents indicated that the cost of the affiliation dues outweigh the benefits the Affiliation Fee Program has to offer. In addition, 38% of respondents indicated that students who pay their own membership dues have more of an investment in the organization.

Conclusions

While, the FFA affiliation program offers many benefits to SBAE programs, agriculture teachers in Utah have not widely adopted the program. The FFA Affiliate Fee Program can benefit all students enrolled in SBAE classes through membership in the National FFA Organization, giving all students an equal opportunity to take advantage of the three-circle model of agricultural education. Yet, SBAE teachers seem concerned with student buy-in and the value they place on membership as well as the cost to the chapter. Based on the results, it seems that agriculture teachers in Utah are on two separate ends of the diffusion of innovations continuum (Rogers, 1995). Those that have embraced affiliation seem to be in stage 5 (confirmation) with confidence in their decision to affiliate. It seems the majority of other teachers are in stage 1 (information) or 2 (persuasion), with a lack of appropriate knowledge or persuasive information to make the decision and implement an affiliation program.

Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession

Qualitative research is recommended to explore in depth the perceived benefits and barriers to the FFA Affiliation Fee Program as perceived by Utah agriculture teachers or agriculture teachers nationwide. Additionally, both a qualitative and quantitative study is recommended to explore the perceived benefits and barriers in states that have already adopted the FFA Affiliation Fee Program. Adoption of the affiliation program nationwide can enable all students enrolled in SBAE to have the ideal education through classroom/laboratory instruction, holding an active SAE, and involvement in the National FFA Organization.

References

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