Evaluating a Teacher Recruitment Program: Boom or Bust?

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Introduction

There is a shortage of school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers nationwide (Smith, Lawver, & Foster, 2019). To combat this issue, Oklahoma SBAE professionals offer a week-long academy for 15 high school Juniors. Students attend informational sessions, write a lesson plan, teach a demonstration lesson, and interact with Oklahoma inservice and preservice SBAE teachers as well as Oklahoma State University (OSU) faculty and state SBAE professionals. Students also participate in tours of agricultural industry establishments and SBAE programs. Activities are facilitated by current Oklahoma SBAE teachers. Preservice SBAE teachers serve as interns.

Coordinators for the Future Ag Teacher Academy (Academy) were interested in assessing the long-term impacts of the program. As current and recent participants have been studied at length, program planners were interested in Academy alumni pursuing agricultural education as a college major at OSU. The research question, *What are the long-term impacts of the Academy on agricultural education preservice teachers?* guided this program evaluation and addressed the research priority of recruiting SBAE teachers (Stripling & Rickets, 2016).

Conceptual Framework

This program evaluation utilized the Center for Disease Control (CDC)'s (1999) recommended framework. The CDC (1999) recommends six cyclical steps that revolve around the standards of utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy. The six steps include (1) *Engage stakeholders*, (2) *Describe the program*, (3) *Focus the evaluation design*, (4) *Gather credible evidence*, (5) *Justify conclusions*, and (6) *Ensure use and share lessons learned*. This framework was designed to be a "practical, nonprescriptive tool, designed to summarize and organize the essential elements of program evaluation" (CDC, 1999, p. 4).

Methodology

A mixed-methods explanatory sequential design uses responses from the quantitative instrument to guide qualitative interviews. This is a common method utilized in program evaluation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Phase One consisted of a quantitative questionnaire distributed to SBAE preservice teachers (N =87). A summated scale assessed perceptions of the Academy's impact on career choice. Descriptive statistics analyzed this data utilizing IBM's SPSS software version 23 (Landau & Everitt, 2004). A total of 71 usable responses (82% response rate) were generated from the quantitative instrument. Phase Two employed qualitative interviews. Past participants who provided their email address in the quantitative instrument were contacted to schedule short interviews. Of the 11 respondents who indicated they had participated in the Academy, ten volunteered to be interviewed. These semi-structured interviews were driven by four main interview questions; (1) *How did you come to apply for the Academy?*, (2) *Tell me what you remember from the Academy*, (3) *How did the Academy influence your perception of Oklahoma agricultural education?*, and (4) *How did the Academy influence your enrollment in agricultural education at OSU?* Follow-up and probing questions were asked as necessary. Each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym for confidentiality. Data was coded and organized into themes utilizing the constant comparative method (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Findings

Quantitative results are found in Table 1. *Knowledge of SBAE* and *college expectations* were the items of greatest impact. *Teaching ability* reflected the least impact. Qualitative interview responses including impacts on *knowledge of SBAE*, *college expectations*, and *familiarity with staff*. Trisha, Gary, and Amanda reported the SBAE program visits were one of their favorite parts. All interviewees reported they were seriously considering OSU before the Academy. However, Nancy and Trent enjoyed the dorm experience and interacting with current preservice teachers. All but Nancy reported they had at least some interest in a career teaching SBAE prior to their experiences at the Academy. For Amanda and Trent, the experiences of the Academy cemented their interest in this career path. Trisha and Gary were confident they would pursue agricultural education as a major at OSU. Each interviewee mentioned the nightly debriefing sessions with Academy facilitators as one of the most impactful aspects. Trent said, "The (facilitators) were really down to earth. They talked to us about the real-life stuff of teaching ag ed. They treated us more as equals than students." Trisha said, "Seeing (female Academy facilitator) be a good ag teacher makes me think I can be like her."

Table 1.
Long-Term Impact of Future Ag Teacher Academy on Selected Outcomes

Item	Frequencies of Responses				Mean
	No Impact (1)	Very Little Impact (2)	Some Impact (3)	Great Impact (4)	
Knowledge of SBAE	0	1	1	9	3.73
College Expectations	0	1	2	8	3.64
Familiarity with Staff	0	0	7	4	3.36
Teaching Ability	1	4	4	2	2.64
Knowledge of Ag	1	1	4	5	3.18

Conclusions

While the Academy did not seem to make great impacts on important life decisions such as college attendance and career choice, the activities and interactions of the Academy did positively impact participants. Networking with current SBAE teachers was very meaningful. Even after an extended time, Academy participants clearly remembered their time with current SBAE teachers. These individuals served as effective models for future SBAE teachers (Bandura, 1977). Items relating to teaching demonstrations showed low impact. This teaching experience was not a topic readily expressed by interviewees. This activity appears to have little lasting influence.

Implications and Recommendations

The importance of SBAE professionals in the Academy can hardly be overstated. It is vital to continue these relationships to involve individuals in Academy activities. The teaching presentations should be redesigned for long-term impact. Why were these activities the least reported during qualitative interviews? Additional evaluation should follow-up with participants who did not pursue a major in agricultural education. How do their experiences compare with those of current preservice teachers? Why did they choose an alternative career pathway?

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