

**Recruitment Factors Influencing the Undergraduate College Choice Process of Kansas  
State University Agricultural Education Students**

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## **Introduction/Need for Research**

There continues to be a shortage of agricultural education graduates to meet the yearly demand for qualified teachers (Smith et al., 2017). The number of vacancies has been increasing as well as the number of positions and programs added yearly. In September 2017 there were 72 full time and 4 part-time vacancies and a growth of 216 new positions and 186 new programs added (Smith et al., 2018). In an effort to meet the demand, agricultural education programs at universities across the nation are ramping up their recruitment efforts (“Teacher Recruitment and Retention,” n.d.). The 2016-2020 AAAE National Research Agenda Priority Area 3 communicates the need to investigate effective methods of recruiting agricultural education professionals (Stripling & Ricketts, 2016). To improve recruitment efforts, a better understanding of the student’s college choice decision making processes is needed. This study’s aim was to identify recruitment factors influencing the undergraduate college choice process for students enrolled in Kansas State University Agricultural Education major.

## **Conceptual Framework**

This study was framed around Chapman’s Model of Influences on Student College Choice (Chapman, 1981). There are two main factors influencing college choice decisions: student characteristics and external factors (Chapman, 1981). The model includes three external influence categories: influences of significant people, the fixed characteristics of the institution, and the institution’s own efforts to communicate with prospective students (Chapman, 1981). Significant persons’ influence functioned in three different ways: their comments from student’s expectation of colleges, their direct advice as to where the student should apply and go, and where close friends have gone to school can influence the student’s decision as well (Chapman, 1981). The fixed university characteristics include: cost, financial aid, location, and availability of desired course programs (Chapman, 1981). The final category of Chapman’s model (1981) is the communication efforts of the college toward potential students.

## **Methodology**

The purpose of this research was to examine the college choice process of students in the major in an effort to make improvements to the recruitment process. Three research objectives guided the study: 1). Determine usefulness of information sources 2). Examine external influences in a student’s decision to enroll and 3). Examine student’s college choice timeline regarding majoring in Agricultural Education at Kansas State University (KSU).

Survey research design (Dillman et al., 2014) was utilized to collect the data. The population included students in the Agricultural Education major at KSU at the start of the fall 2019 semester ( $N = 86$ ). The instrument for this research was modified from a survey used by Bradford (2016) to investigate recruitment strategies and college-choice decisions of first-year students at Oklahoma State University. Validity of the instrument was established by reviewing the original instrument (Bradford, 2016), adjusting to fit the new population, and testing the Qualtrics survey before dissemination. Post-hoc reliability was conducted on the four main sections of the modified instrument: information sources (.89), significant persons (.87), institutional characteristics (.68) and degree program characteristics (.80). The instrument was

distributed via Qualtrics in early Fall 2019. An email was sent out over the AGED listserv with a request to complete the survey and a link to the survey. Responses were anonymous. Three emails were sent out to obtain a response rate of 45% ( $n = 39$ ). Data collected from the survey was analyzed using SPSS 26. Means and standard deviations were calculated for each research objective as well as frequencies. There are limitations to the study including the 45% response rate and only one university's agricultural education degree program included.

### **Results**

The respondents included 15 freshmen, 9 sophomore, 6 juniors, and 9 seniors. Six students indicated they changed their major to agricultural education, while the remaining 33 started in the degree program. The first objective sought to understand the usefulness of information used by students to make the college-choice decision. The top three items rated as *very useful* include: participation in 4-H and/or FFA events on campus ( $n = 22$ ); visit to campus ( $n = 19$ ); contact with a professor on the campus ( $n = 18$ ).

The second objective examined external influences on the student's decision to enroll in agricultural education at KSU. The top three *most influential* items included career opportunities available for graduates ( $M = 4.64$ ,  $SD = .54$ ); quality and reputation of the course ( $M = 4.19$ ,  $SD = .95$ ); and quality and reputation of the faculty ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ). When asked to evaluate how significant people influenced their decision to major in agricultural education at KSU, the top-rated group were high school agriculture teachers ( $n = 20$ ).

The third objective examined the college-choice timeline of students currently majoring in agricultural education at Kansas State University. Approximately one-third of the respondents ( $n = 13$ , 35%) knew they would major in agricultural education before their senior year in high school, an additional eleven (30%) made that decision during their senior year with the remaining thirteen (35%) making the decision during the college enrollment process or after.

### **Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations**

Several conclusions and recommendations can be made from the results of this research. Participants reported their time spent on campus and contact with professors and other interactions with the major at off campus events were very useful when making the college choice decision. This confirms the importance of campus tours and events hosted by different entities to expose students to campus (Robinson et al., 2007) and the need to provide a variety of "touchpoints" with potential students in an effort to connect and encourage them to major in the degree program. Preparation for employment was the highest rated external influence demonstrating students really do care about the need to be educated and ready to enter the workforce upon graduation (Bradford, 2016). High school agriculture teachers continue to be a highly influential group of individuals for students majoring in agricultural education (Washburn et al., 2002). They should be made aware of their impact on students. Recruitment efforts should continue to target students prior to their senior year of high school, but must extend beyond high school graduation to include students at community colleges (Bradford, 2016).

Work must continue in the areas that were found to be influential and useful, while further examination should occur regarding the practices that did not have as high of an impact on the college choice decision process. Additionally, this survey should be sent to new students in the major to investigate how recruitment efforts changed due to the impact of COVID-19.

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