

**To Join or Not to Join: Factors Influencing Agricultural Educators' Decision Regarding
Their State Professional Teacher Association**

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Introduction and Need for the Research

Professional associations exist to provide a variety of services to professionals in specific fields. These associations must offer something of benefit for members to feel that being part of the association is worth their time and money (Markova et al., 2013). Lawver and Lee (1990) established that school-based ag education (SBAE) teachers are more likely to join the state and national associations for agricultural education if they meet four requirements: not members of a teacher union, have a background in traditional production agriculture, teach in a traditional school, and were student members in a professional organization.

The profession is changing. According to the National Supply and Demand Project, Foster et al. (2020) identified females now outnumber males and between 20-30 SBAE teachers are alternatively certified annually in North Carolina. In a study by King et al. (2013), over half of the female teachers in the southeast are balancing family responsibilities along with long working hours and expectations. These changing demographics may mean the motivating factors to join the state and national professional association for SBAE could have changed as well over recent years. Ki and Wang (2016) posited a conceptual relationship between a person's satisfaction with the personal and professional benefits they received from a professional association and the behavioral intention to join. We framed our study to assess both members' perceptions of these benefits and their decision to join as well as barriers preventing them from joining.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand why North Carolina SBAE teachers are choosing to join or not join their professional association. A descriptive survey design was utilized. The survey was sent to all teachers in the North Carolina ag teacher directory ($N = 555$) regardless of whether they were members of the state professional association. The instrument was designed using skip logic to gather information from both members and non-members. First emails were sent via Qualtrics in May 2021 with two follow up reminders sent via email in June. Upon completion of data collection, 245 complete responses were received for a 44% response rate. Of those responding, 74 were not currently members and 155 were members. The proportion of respondents that were male and female aligned with the larger population data for the state. Utilizing scale items from an instrument validated and established as reliable by Price (1993), members were asked to rank the importance of items in their decision to join on a scale from 1-5 with 1= Extremely important and 5= Not at all important. We also asked non-members to indicate all of the reasons they were not joining from a pre-populated list. This list was established using prior information informally collected by the North Carolina teachers' association. We also included an "other" option and the opportunity to add an open-ended response. The average respondent was 37 years of age ($SD = 11.12$) with the females averaging 34 years of age and the males averaging 41 years of age, again mirroring the state data.

Results

When current members were asked why they were joining, the top five reasons included Protecting 12-month employment ($M = 1.62$, $SD = 1.04$), "I see it as a professional responsibility

of my job to join” ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 0.84$), Networking with other ag teachers ($M = 1.81$, $SD = 0.93$), Exchanging ideas about the total ag education program with other North Carolina ag teachers ($M = 1.97$, $SD = 1.00$), and Benefitting from the North Carolina ag teachers’ association-funded legislative advocacy (lobbyist) ($M = 1.99$, $SD = 0.98$).

This fifth item might need a little explanation as it is potentially unique to the state. North Carolina passed legislation in 2017 whereby all SBAE teachers at the high school level shall be employed for 12 calendar months (North Carolina General Statutes 115C, 2017). Currently, 435 of 460 high school SBAE teachers in North Carolina are 12 month employees (Joshua Bledsoe, State Director, email communication, October 2021). The legislation does not apply to the state’s 96 middle school teachers, 93 of whom are 10 month employees. The teacher professional association funded a portion of a lobbyist’s time and was instrumental in securing this legislation.

Those who responded to the survey and were not currently members of the association could be largely distilled down to money and communication. The largest portion of non-members indicated the cost was too high ($N = 23$) while many open ended responses also addressed the cost, particularly during a global pandemic. Some of the open-ended responses included needing to reallocate their funds for their wedding or not seeing the benefit from the money they had paid in the past. Many respondents indicated they missed their window to pay their dues or did not know who or how to pay their dues ($N = 18$) or simply forgot to pay ($N = 15$).

Conclusions

Based on the data collected, SBAE teachers are joining their state professional associations for a multitude of reasons. Both personal and professional perceived benefits of membership were recognized as major influencing factors in establishing or maintaining membership, in alignment with Ki and Wang (2016). Those that come to the forefront in North Carolina involve professionalism, networking, and legislative representation. Teachers that were not members identified money and communication as the largest factors influencing their decision to not join. Each of these factors are important to consider when recruiting teachers to join or renew their membership annually.

Implications/Recommendations/Impact

Because this study attempted a census, but fell short of receiving responses from everyone, findings are not generalizable. To provide the biggest impact for teachers, state associations should build stronger partnerships with the universities in their state, provide more networking opportunities for members, and establish a stronger avenue of communication with all current and pre-service teachers about the benefits received by paying membership dues. State association leadership should individually reach out to each eligible non-member in their region to open the line of communication. It is recommended this study be replicated on a larger scale to identify more generalizable data. It is also recommended that due to the changing demographic in SBAE teachers further research is conducted to determine if gender responsibilities impact the decision to join.

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