

**Georgia High School Counselors' Perspectives on Agricultural Education**

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## **Introduction**

Counselors have an important task of placing students into high school classes (Johnson & Salmon, 1979) and play an influential role on enrollment within a school-based agricultural program (Talbert et al., 2014). Counselors' perspectives of their school-based agricultural education (SBAE) program likely then have an influence on the placement of students and the type of student that chooses to enroll in a high school agriculture course. Over two decades ago, Woodward and Herren (1995) stated that counselors have great impact on students' choices of educational programs and careers after graduation through a study conducted in the state of Georgia. In addition, counselors help students choose a career, explore postsecondary options, apply to colleges, and obtain scholarship opportunities (Leitner et al., 2006). Further, high school counselors who are more knowledgeable about the value of SBAE courses and the program are more likely to encourage students to enroll in those career and technical education courses (Talbert et al., 2014). As graduation requirements increase, dual enrollment options expand, and AP courses are offered it is increasingly important that program support remains high among counselors to recruit and retain students in SBAE (Kalme & Dyer, 2000). Spacek et al., (2021) found that nearly seven-eighths of Texas high school counselors agree that student interest is their top priority in selecting an agriculture course, but counselors had low to very low awareness about opportunities within the program. Ferguson et al, (2019) stated that the more aware school counselors are of potential STEM careers the better they advise students in taking courses and career planning. Thus, gauging counselors' perspectives of their SBAE program and identifying their awareness of components that would help them advise student career aspirations, college choices, postsecondary opportunities, and scholarship prospects is increasingly important to enrollment numbers within SBAE.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used to guide this study was Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) theory of reasoned action. The theory of reasoned action is based on one's personal attitude toward the subject (SBAE) and the social influence of the subjective norms (working with students to enroll or not enroll in a SBAE course). This theory guided the influence high school counselors' attitudinal beliefs about student enrollment in agricultural education courses and their perceived value of the local agricultural education program. This led to the purpose of the study (replicating the study of Woodard & Herren 27 years later) which was to seek Georgia high school counselors' perceptions toward agricultural education, student course placement, and their knowledge of SBAE programmatic components (scholarships, SAE, leadership conferences, career aspiration events [CDE & LDE], and degree programs).

## **Methodology**

This study used a descriptive cross-sectional design. The census population ( $N=216$ ) for the study was Georgia high school counselors that had SBAE. The instrument used in the study was a previous instrument used in the state from Woodward and Herren (1995) that reported a Cronbach's alpha of .85. This questionnaire was chosen because of previous use and the ability to meet research objectives. The instrument was adapted in a way to update terminology used in present day SBAE. Dillman, Smyth, and Christian's (2014) tailored design method was followed for data collection with the use of Qualtrics system. A total of 82 respondents completed the questionnaire resulting in a 38% response rate. A post hoc alpha coefficient was found to be .86.

Follow-up on non-respondents was conducted resulting in no significant difference and thus lowered the threat to validity.

### **Results/Findings**

Highlighting results, respondents strongly agreed with the statements claiming that the high school agriculture program benefits college prep students ( $M = 4.61$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ), their SBAE program provides students with competencies they will need to succeed in college ( $M = 4.61$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ), and if a college-bound student expresses interest in an agriculture course, they will advise them to enroll ( $M = 4.60$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ). Respondents also strongly agreed that agriculture programs are valuable for college ( $M = 4.69$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ) and noncollege bound students ( $M = 4.71$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ). Respondents perceived their high school agriculture program was very good ( $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ) along with FFA ( $M = 4.84$ ,  $SD = 0.42$ ) and SAE ( $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ). Respondents strongly agreed that their school's agriculture teacher had positive relationships with their school's administration ( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) and agreed that their agriculture teacher had positive relationships with core academic teachers ( $M = 4.42$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ). The statement "Our agriculture teachers are as effective in their teaching as our core-academic teachers," respondents, agreed ( $M = 4.35$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ). Respondents agreed that students who enroll in SBAE ( $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) are less academically inclined. Further, they agreed that SBAE courses are intended for non-college bound ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) and they neither agree nor disagreed ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) that parents of college-prep students are reluctant to have their child enroll in SBAE courses. Respondents were asked their awareness of components of SBAE; respondents claim they were moderately aware ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) of FFA scholarship programs and public speaking LDEs ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ). Washington Leadership Conference was ranked the lowest awareness by respondents ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ).

### **Conclusions/ Implications**

Overall, respondents had positive perceptions (either strongly agree or agree) of SBAE, the agriculture teacher's teaching ability, and program quality. Continued relationships between agriculture teachers and counselors should remain a high priority. Teachers should continue to communicate scholarship opportunities and careers within the agriculture industry, which has been a focus within the state. Respondents also indicated that they were aware of the components of a SBAE program. This is evidence that communication between state staff and DOE staff to schools and counselors has been effective. Respondents strongly agreed with the statements regarding the value of agriculture programs to college-prep students. The reason for this may be due to their awareness of scholarship programs, industry demands, and postsecondary opportunities that make up the SBAE program. Counselor recognition of college degrees within the field of agriculture is well known. These results align with Herren and Woodard (1995) and Spacek et al., (2021) that also found counselors believed agriculture courses applied to college-bound students. Comparing results from this study to that of Herren and Woodard (1995), there was an increase in the awareness of the FFA scholarship programs. The results also aligned with previous studies that indicated respondents agreed with statements stating that agriculture programs are valuable to both college-bound and noncollege bound students. Therefore, it can be concluded that respondents believe that agriculture courses serve the needs of students regardless of career aspirations and post-secondary school goals. Based on the result that counselors were uncertain if parents of college-prep students were reluctant to have their child enroll in SBAE it is recommended that SBAE teachers place more focus on educating the parents of perceptive students about college opportunities and potential careers within the agricultural industry.

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