

Who's Involved and Who Isn't? A Demographic Study of Senior FFA Members

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Introduction

Participation in the National FFA Organization (2022b) is a crucial component of the three-component model of school-based agricultural education (SBAE). Active involvement allows an individual member to obtain leadership development, personal growth, and career success. A record 760,113 members were enrolled in the organization as of 2020 (National FFA Organization, 2022c). Barriers to involvement must be identified to ensure all members have the opportunity to achieve the FFA's mission. This national descriptive study of 2020-2021 high school senior members of the National FFA Organization was conducted to identify how involved members of the National FFA Organization were on the chapter, district/area/region, state, and national levels. This addressed the AAAE Research Priority 4: Meaningful, Engaged Learning in All Environments.

Theoretical Framework

This study used Astin's (1984, 1999) Theory of Involvement as a framework to evaluate students' participation in the National FFA Organization. Astin's theory is rooted in five basic assumptions: (1) involvement requires the investment of mental and physical energy, (2) involvement is continuous and varies, (3) involvement may be quantitative and qualitative, (4) the level of involvement is directly related to the amount of development gained from being involved, and (5) involvement correlates with academic performance. Past studies have found benefits to involvement in student organizations (Astin, 1996; Cooper et al., 1994; Dugan, 2006; Rubin et al., 2002; Velez et al., 2018). Additional studies have used Astin's Theory of Involvement as a theoretical framework to research the effects of involvement in high school student organizations (Rayfield et al., 2008; Rosch & Nelson, 2018; Simonsen et al., 2014).

Methodology

We used a descriptive research design with an online Qualtrics® survey to identify participants' FFA Involvement, Academic Success, and Demographics. We modified the FFA involvement section from Copeland's (2019) study to measure the type, duration, and level of involvement the participants had in the organization. The Academic Success section was also adapted from Copeland's study and measured self-reported GPA, post high school plans, and interest in post-secondary agricultural-related education. The Demographic section included ethnicity, age, gender identity, urban or rural classification, the receipt of free and reduced lunch as a measure of social economic status, internet access, and access to technological devices. The Purdue University Institutional Review Board gave approval to conduct the study. The study occurred in fall of 2020 with 1,528 respondents completing the online survey.

FFA Involvement. This section asked respondents to indicate their involvement in eight FFA events: officer positions, Leadership Development Events (LDE), Career Development Events (CDE), Agriscience Fair, conventions, leadership conferences or camps, FFA degrees, and the submission of proficiency awards. This questionnaire was modeled from similar scales used in previous Agricultural Education studies (Copeland, 2019; Dormody & Seevers, 1994; Smith et al., 2010; Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997). The respondents' total score was calculated by a numerical value assigned to the headings of no participation (0), chapter participation (1), district/area/region

participation (2), state participation (3), and national participation (4) for each of the seven FFA events. Degree values were no participation (0), Discovery (1), Greenhand (2), Chapter (3), and State FFA Degree (4). Total scores could range from 0 to 76. Values for officer positions were zero to three, as high school seniors are ineligible for national officer positions. A total score of 0 indicted an FFA member who was Not Involved. A total score of 1-10 was defined as Lightly Involved indicating some chapter level involvement or mostly chapter level with one to two higher level participation activities possible. A total score of 11-30 was defined as Moderately Involved, a total score of 31-50 was defined as Actively Involved, and total score of 51-76 was defined as Substantially Involved. To obtain a score of at least 51, the FFA member would be involved in numerous state activities and one or more national activities. This FFA member would most likely also be extensively involved on the chapter and district levels as well.

Findings

Participants had a total mean involvement score of 18.7, indicating they were Moderately Involved. However, 6.4% of members had an involvement score of zero, with 75 participants indicating no participation in any of the eight involvement areas. Latinx and Black FFA members approached 20% reporting No Involvement. Members from Rural RUCA Classification had a higher score and those from Metropolitan had a lower. Female members had a higher score than Male. White members had a higher score. Members receiving free/reduced lunch had a lower score. Members with an “A” Overall GPA had a higher score and those with a “C” had a lower in the Slight Involvement category. Future plans involving Agriculture and 4- Year College had a higher FFA Involvement score.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The results imply a rural, White, female, with an “A” GPA, not receiving free and reduced lunch, planning to attend a 4-year college and pursue Agriculture as a career has a higher involvement in FFA. The current study did not explore why such a composite demographic profile has a higher Involvement score. Viewing this conclusion through the theoretical framework’s lens (Astin, 1984, 1996, 1999), FFA members whose involvement is continuous and varied and who see the value of that involvement are more likely to pursue higher levels of activity in the organization. Conversely, a lack of learning and professional development are barriers to participation and involvement. We recommend local FFA advisors and state level FFA leaders actively work to ensure FFA events and degree programs are inclusive and to encourage FFA members not fitting this profile to become more involved. We recommend National FFA and Agricultural Education leaders expeditiously implement the Agricultural Education for All efforts (National FFA Organization, 2022a).

Overall Mean FFA Involvement was Moderately Involved. However, when looked at by group, several approached Lightly Involved. Students from ethnic minority groups were more likely to have No Involvement. These findings are similar to that of Velez et al. (2018) who found that Black males were more involved in non-SBAE Career and Technical Student Organizations and that White females were 20% more likely to hold officer positions in SBAE Career and Technical Student Organizations. Focused, targeted efforts on local, state, and national levels must occur to actively involve FFA members from groups with low involvement.

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