

**What is the Perceived Ability of Agriculture Teachers to Achieve Positive Work-Life Integration During the School Year?**

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### **Introduction/ Theoretical Framework**

The concept of balance is not foreign to School Based Agricultural Education (SBAE). Countless students across the nation have been taught to balance feed rations, discussed pH balance during a hydroponics unit, or learned to read a balance in agriscience. Despite our familiarity with balance, one area the SBAE profession seems to struggle with is work-life balance, also referred to as work-life integration. Osborne (1992), while discussing SBAE, stated “the stress, heavy workload, and constant pressure to be better has resulted in a profession that literally devours its young” (p.3). Given the long-standing national shortage of SBAE teachers, over the last decade a great deal of attention has been paid to the topic of work-life integration (Clemons et al., 2021; Hopkins et al., 2020; Murray et al., 2011; Solomonson et al., 2022; Sorensen et al., 2016; Traini et al., 2019; Traini et al., 2020).

We framed our study around the documented relationship between one's work and non-work life, also known as spillover. Wilensky (1960) noted the relationship between work and leisure has been a topic of scholarly contemplation as far back as ancient Greece and Rome. Only since the industrial revolution has interaction between the two become a real concern. The “spillover leisure hypothesis” (p. 544) addresses the carryover of the mental strain of work to the home. Voydanoff (1980) noted that the relationship between work and family life is not simply a one-way street with family life often impacting work. Crouter (1984) posited the reciprocal spillover between work and life can be categorized into cognitive and behavioral areas. Using the concept of spillover as a guide, we developed our purpose and objectives.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of our descriptive study was to investigate SBAE teachers' perceived ability to achieve positive work-life integration during the school year. Our specific objectives were: (1) Describe the hours spent on SBAE work activities outside of contract time, (2) Determine if differences existed in hours spent on specific SBAE work activities among various demographic groups, and (3) Explain the perceived ability of a SBAE teacher to achieve positive work-life integration. It should be noted this project was part of a larger study examining work-life integration of agriculture teachers in Illinois.

After receiving IRB approval, we sent out an electronic questionnaire to all 519 full-time agriculture teachers in Illinois. Contact information was obtained from the online Illinois agriculture teachers' directory. Our instrument consisted of three parts. Part one asked eight questions on hours spent on specific work activities outside of contract time. Part two asked three questions on their perceived ability to balance career and personal time. Part three asked our demographic questions. The questions were chosen from a valid and reliable instrument used within a prior study on work-life balance (Murray et al., 2011). Using Dillman et al.'s (2014) tailored-design method, we scheduled five points of contact over four-weeks to collect data. This approach yielded 165 usable responses and a 31.79% response rate. Data were analyzed using SPSS<sup>®</sup> version 26.0. Frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, and t-tests were used to analyze data.

### **Findings**

Objective one sought to describe the hours agriculture teachers spend on work activities outside of contract time. During the school year, our participants self-reported working an average of 56.4 hours per week, and of those, 16.4 hours outside of their contract time. The specific work activities conducted outside of contract time can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Average Number of Hours Per Week Agriculture Teachers Spend Outside of Contract Time on Work Activities (n = 165)*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
FFA Activities	5.33	3.80
Classroom and Lab Preparation/ Lesson Planning	4.34	3.53
Operation and Maintenance of Facilities	2.04	2.12
Reports and Paperwork	1.82	2.42
SAE Activities	1.31	1.88
Meetings	1.26	1.85
Other	.26	1.24

Objective two was used to determine if differences existed in hours spent on work activities among various demographic groups, specifically sex, marital status, and children. We found no significant differences in total hours worked when examining sex. Males reported working an average of 16.59 hours per week ( $SD = 10.06$ ) and females 16.19 hours per week ( $SD = 9.67$ ). Further, no significant differences existed in the total hours worked between those with children living at home ( $M = 15.96$ ,  $SD = 10.53$ ) and those with no children ( $M = 16.89$ ,  $SD = 8.82$ ). However, we did discover two significant differences when examining marital status. Those married reported working 15.29 hours per week ( $SD = 9.31$ ) outside of contract time, while those not married 19.13 hours per week ( $SD = 10.62$ ),  $t(163) = 2.28$ ,  $p = .02$ . Those not married also reported working significantly more ( $M = 5.63$ ,  $SD = 4.48$ ) on classroom/ laboratory preparation and lesson planning than those married ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 2.96$ ),  $t(163) = 3.00$ ,  $p = .00$ .

Objective three attempted to explain the perceived ability of an agriculture teacher to achieve positive work-life integration. Over half our participants ( $f = 98$ ; 59.4%) reported that they can usually achieve a positive work-life integration during the school year, but it was difficult at times. Forty-eight participants (29.1%) indicated it is always difficult to have a positive work-life integration, while four participants (2.4%) said it was completely impossible. Adversely, fifteen participants (9.1%) reported having no issues and they always felt they could achieve a positive work-life integration during the school year.

### **Conclusions, Implications, & Recommendations**

Illinois SBAE teachers, regardless of sex, are devoting significant time beyond their contractual requirements to attend to all their work activities. The 56.4 hours per week being reported is consistent with existing literature suggesting SBAE teachers devote 55-57 hours per week to their jobs (Cooper & Nelson, 1981; Murray et al., 2011). Solomonson, et al. (2022) found Illinois SBAE teachers possessed high levels of occupational commitment suggesting these hours beyond contract time should not come as a surprise. More than half of the hours worked each week outside of contract time are devoted to FFA activities, and preparation and planning for instruction. While no differences were found between the sexes, unmarried teachers do work significantly more hours each week and devote more time to the area of classroom and laboratory preparation. Further study should examine the nature of the FFA activities that require so much beyond contract time. Research should also look at ways to aid teachers in planning and preparation for classroom and laboratory instruction.

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