

Perceptions and Experiences are Important: Career Choice in Agriculture

Katrina Swinehart Held, Ph.D.

Central State University

1400 Brush Row, Wilberforce, OH 45384

(937) 405-9025

kswinehart@centralstate.edu

Introduction

One industry with growing need for new talent is the agriculture industry. In fact, the labor force participation in the agriculture industry has been decreasing over time, about 20,000 jobs in agriculture are not filled each year, while only 3% of college graduates have or would consider a career in agriculture (Roser, 2013). One of the reasons cited for the disinterest in the industry are the negative perceptions, often misconceptions, that they hold towards careers in the industry. Recent research identified that these misconceptions are present due to the belief all agricultural jobs are physical in nature, that the jobs in the industry provide low incomes, and the belief that the jobs are not challenging (Fatimahwati, 2019). Callan, et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of exposure to agricultural topics through instruction at their school, especially if there are strong connections to their personal interests and their career aspirations.

The issue of student career choice has been at the forefront of the faculty at Central State University in Ohio. Since earning their 1890 Land Grant Status in 2014, recruiting and enrolling students in the agriculture majors have been a concern. Many faculty have this concern due to the large urban student population on campus who are not aware of agricultural careers.

Theoretical Framework

Prior research has utilized the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to explain the rationale for a specific career choice, which indicates that planning played a significant role in their decision making. TPB has been used previously to explore youth engagement in agriculture and their career choices (Roy, 2023). The basis of TPB is that people who hold positive beliefs will take actions based on them; this is one of the most powerful models for predicting human behavior (Ajzen, 1991). TPB also explores aspects of decision making including the perception of authority and control, norms, and attitude toward behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions students held about selecting to study agriculture and pursue a career in agriculture. The qualitative research question was:

- 1) What experiences, beliefs, and people were meaningful to your career choice?

Methodology

A grounded theory design was utilized that included a semi-structured interview to understand the processes that occurred for the students to select a future career in agriculture. This study engaged with university students in all stages of seeking their degree.

Purposive sampling was used to identify students majoring in agriculture ($n = 52$) to participate in the semi-structured interviews. From the invited sample, 10 students participated. Their ages ranged from 18–21 years old, and the group was comprised of 6 females and 4 males.

Data was collected through a semi-structured, one-on-one video interview (Zoom) and field notes. The interview questions were developed to gain knowledge about the decision-making process behind seeking a career in agriculture. The following are sample questions from the interview: What experiences with agriculture did you have prior to coming to campus? Can

you tell me the perceptions your support system has about agriculture? All interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and was transcribed verbatim. During the interviews field notes were used to document participant body language, and necessary prompting or follow up questions. After 8 interviews, data saturation was reached as responses were similar. However, to ensure that saturation was achieved, 2 additional interviews were conducted.

Since this study was coded by a lone researcher, trustworthiness was inherently met. Credibility was built through having experts review the interview questions and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Basic coding was used to group interview content into themes.

Results/Findings

The first theme that emerged was students had experience with food security. Students discussed that they lived in or had family or friends impacted by a food desert. Their drive to study agriculture was to address that issue for their family or community. DeMarcus shared “I want to help my community as an agricultural teacher to help students learn about growing food and agriculture so that this generational issue ends.” Other students discussed the issues they faced with access to fresh food, even in their school cafeterias and after school programs.

The second theme that emerged was students wanted to give back to their community with their new knowledge and career. Jasmine described her desire to mentor by sharing “I need to give back because people gave me support and that’s community.” Whether it was through hands-on experiences, starting programs, or being there for their community each student talked about their desire to mentor because they were mentored throughout their life.

The third theme that emerged was the lack of exposure to agriculture prior to coming to campus. Many students talked about seeing the greenhouses, farm equipment, and campus garden being the spark to their interest in agriculture. Advisors and faculty are important to connecting students with knowledge and opportunities because of this. Keke stated “My advisor has spent hours with me looking at internships. Her help has been essential.” None of the students knew about 4-H, their schools did not have agricultural education, and their limited school activities were with music or sports. Students expressed a desire to share what they know now about agriculture with children in their home communities.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

The themes that emerged from the data from interviews with the students demonstrated that their experiences leading to college were impactful to their future decisions regarding their career. The students were impacted by knowledge or experiences that they had but also those they lacked. More exposure to agriculture and the careers in the agriculture industry are essential to helping students make earlier decisions about their future career.

While these findings are limited to the sample in this study, useful recommendations can be provided. Agricultural education should continue to broaden offerings to more urban high schools to provide meaningful exposure to the industry. College campuses and employers need to partner to display information about agriculture careers to avoid misconceptions.

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