

**Examining the Relationship Between Participation in Registered Student Organizations
and Agriculture Student Demographics**

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Introduction/ Theoretical Framework

Research has shown that student participation in university extracurricular activities has significantly declined following the COVID-19 pandemic (Saunders, 2021). Despite the many proven benefits of Registered Student Organizations (RSOs) in college life, many students are still disengaged. Flaherty (2023) recently found that one-third of students reported spending no time weekly on extracurriculars. RSO participation has been shown to be essential for student development as it fosters communication, global awareness, and problem-solving skills, which are critical for post-college success (Webber et al., 2013). Participation also enhances a sense of belonging as students involved in at least one organization report greater campus connection (Fox Stump, 2022). Further, these organizations assist in social networking, professional development, and stress relief (Bentley, 2022) while building a strong sense of community.

Despite these advantages, students still opt out. According to Flaherty (2023), 41% of students cite the timing and location of events as barriers, and 36% report off-campus work commitments. Fredrickson et al. (2024) found that 26% of students discontinued memberships due to time constraints and a lack of perceived benefits. Other barriers include membership costs, commuting distance, and caretaking responsibilities (Flaherty, 2023). Mental health challenges, worsened by the pandemic, also reduced motivation and energy to participate (Saunders, 2021). Further, some students simply reported a lack of interest in events or felt unwelcome (Bateman et al., 2024), suggesting a deeper need for inclusivity and relevance.

Despite these setbacks, the benefits of RSO involvement remain substantial. Employers value students active in organizations, seeing them as more career-ready (Webber et al., 2013). Such students often report higher GPAs and greater satisfaction with their college experience (Center for the Study of Student Life, 2020). Involvement helps students make friends, build networks, and develop leadership skills (Haines, 2019). This study sought to identify the specific barriers to student participation at Illinois State University and uncover strategies to reverse the trend of declining engagement with the goal of making RSO involvement more accessible and rewarding.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) was used to underpin our study as it emphasizes learning through observation and modeling of others (Bandura, 1977). Students may be inspired to join RSOs after witnessing peers gain scholarships or leadership roles. Vicarious learning and self-efficacy are key components of this theory (Bandura & Walters, 1963; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2021). Educators can foster participation by presenting strong peer role models and collaborative environments, as SLT predicts these behaviors will be replicated. By creating opportunities for students to observe and engage with successful peers, SLT suggests that motivation and participation in student organizations can be significantly increased.

Purpose and Methods

Our study examined the relationships among agriculture student demographics, RSO participation levels, barriers to RSO involvement, and satisfaction with campus life at Illinois State University post-pandemic. This was a part of a larger study focusing on identifying specific barriers prohibiting active participation in RSOs on our campus. Following IRB approval during the spring 2024 semester, a valid and reliable online questionnaire was distributed via Qualtrics to all 362 undergraduate students in the Department of Agriculture. Using recommendations from Dillman et al. (2024), five points of contact over a four-week period were used to collect data. Contact information was obtained from our academic advising office. Our questionnaire

consisted of three parts. Part one asked questions about hours spent on extracurriculars and satisfaction levels. Part two asked questions about perceived barriers to participation. Part three asked our demographic questions. A 22.9% response rate ($n = 83$) was achieved. Data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were calculated, and Chi-square tests were used to identify statistically significant differences across the demographic groups. We addressed non-response error by comparing the responses of early and late respondents. No significant differences between the groups were found at the $p < .05$ level.

Results

The typical respondent was majoring in Animal Science or a closely-related major ($f = 28, 33.7\%$), was female ($f = 49, 59.0\%$), was White ($f = 70, 84.3\%$), worked during the semester ($f = 60, 72.3\%$), received financial aid ($f = 54, 65.1\%$), were not a first-generation college student ($f = 53, 63.9\%$), were not involved in FFA or 4-H in high school ($f = 42, 50.6\%$), were involved in non-Agriculture extracurriculars in high school ($f = 45, 54.2\%$), participated in high school sports ($f = 59, 71.1\%$), and entered the university directly from high school ($f = 52, 62.7\%$). Overall, our findings show that an equal number of agriculture students (48.2%) spend zero hours per week and one to five hours per week on activities of their RSOs, while only 3.6% spend more than six hours a week on their extracurriculars. Slightly over half (51.7%) felt satisfied with their overall involvement in campus life beyond the classroom, while only 39.8% felt satisfied with their agriculture RSO involvement.

Several significant differences were observed across majors and genders when examining weekly time spent on extracurricular activities. Agriculture Education students and female students reported significantly more hours each week participating in RSOs than their peers. Barriers to RSO participation differed considerably across student demographics. For example, “time and location of events” were significant across majors and ethnicity, while “mental and physical health” differed by gender and first-generation status. Employment status was also deemed significant across demographics. Further, “lack of knowledge” about RSOs varied significantly among students active in extracurriculars during high school, and “caretaking responsibilities” were more prevalent barriers for transfer students than those entering directly from high school. Satisfaction with campus life also varied within the demographic groups. Agriculture Education students and students of color reported higher satisfaction with agriculture RSO involvement than other groups, while first-generation college students expressed lower satisfaction with overall campus life.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

These findings highlight the diverse experiences of agriculture students and emphasize the need for strategies to reduce barriers and increase student engagement in RSOs, specifically among various demographic groups. Significant demographic variations emerged in both participation and perceived barriers. Factors such as timing and location of events, mental and physical health, and lack of awareness about RSOs were cited most frequently, which are consistent with previous literature (Bateman et al., 2024; Flaherty, 2023; Fredrickson et al., 2024). These findings also affirm Bandura’s SLT (1977), as students not seeing relatable role models or clear benefits may lack motivation to participate. It is recommended that student leadership in these agriculture RSOs review these findings and make modifications to their schedules and recruitment efforts to yield a higher participation rate for potential members.

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