

Barriers and Benefits of Participating in a National Agricultural Education Student Organization

Henry Koerner
University of Minnesota
Agricultural Education, Communication, and Marketing Department
218 Ruttan Hall, 1994 Buford Ave
St. Paul, MN 55108
koern077@umn.edu

Caleb Seboldt
University of Illinois
Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications Program
174 Bevier Hall, 905 S. Goodwin Ave.
Urbana, IL 61801
seboldt2@illinois.edu

Laura L. Rice, Ph.D.
Pennsylvania State University
Department of Agricultural Economics, Sociology, and Education
213 Ferguson Building
University Park, PA 16802
lls203@psu.edu

Jay K. Solomonson, Ph.D.
Illinois State University
Department of Agriculture
301 N. Main Street, 140 Ropp Agriculture Building
Normal, IL 61790-5020
jksolom@ilstu.edu

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Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Involvement in student organizations significantly enhances the collegiate experience by fostering leadership skills, building social networks, and improving academic and career outcomes (EU Business School, 2024; Honor Society, 2024; Webber et al., 2013). These experiences not only enrich students' time in college but also prepare them for the complexities of the professional world (EU Business School, 2024). Agricultural education student organizations, like Alpha Tau Alpha (ATA), provide unique opportunities for aspiring agricultural educators to grow professionally through leadership, service, and networking (Alpha Tau Alpha Organization, n.d.). ATA offers a community that supports students in developing skills needed for success in agricultural education careers. Despite these clear benefits, participation levels remain inconsistent across institutions, raising concerns about the potential barriers for students and universities nationwide. Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) is a framework that emphasizes the reciprocal interaction between personal factors, behavior, and environmental influences. SCT can help explore how members of an organization learn from one another, develop leadership skills, and shape the group's culture. The theory's focus on environmental influences allows researchers to assess how the organization's structure, traditions, and peer interactions contribute to member engagement and development. By applying SCT, the study can uncover the mechanisms through which ATA fosters personal growth, collaboration, and sustained involvement among its members. This research aimed to examine the perceived benefits and barriers associated with participation in ATA with the goal of informing the organization's programming to better support student involvement and maximize the impact of organizations alike.

Purpose and Methods

The purpose of our study was to: (1) determine barriers for university agricultural education student organizations to participate in the National Agricultural Education Conference and the ATA Conclave, and (2) describe the perceived benefits gained through active ATA involvement. Our researcher-developed instrument consisted of three demographic questions, six questions on ATA conclave participation and barriers, and one question on benefits gained from ATA involvement. Prior to distributing the online questionnaire via Qualtrics, we had a panel of experts review the instrument for face and content validity. Several questions were edited for clarity. Due to the type and nature of the questions being asked, it was determined that reliability measures were not applicable. Using recommendations from Fricker (2017), a convenience sample was obtained by sending an anonymous link to both those individuals who had registered for the ATA conclave in the past three years and nationwide via the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) listserv during the spring 2025 semester. Two reminders were sent, each a week apart, following the initial email. Our efforts yielded 57 usable responses at the end of our data collection period. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS[®]) program version 26.0. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used to analyze data.

Results

Fifty-seven individuals across 11 institutions completed the online questionnaire. Of those, 61.4% ($n = 35$) identified as undergraduate students, 33.3% ($n = 19$) as faculty advisors, 3.5% ($n = 2$) as graduate students, and 1.8% ($n = 1$) as a former faculty advisor. Several barriers to participation in the ATA conclave were identified. The three most prominent were cost ($n = 21$; 20.8%), time of year ($n = 18$; 17.8%), and conflicts with other events during the National FFA Convention ($n = 17$; 16.8%). Interestingly, 20 respondents (19.8%) indicated that “No Factors Limit My Ability to Participate in Conclave during Convention.” Further, regarding preference for the time of year to conduct the ATA Conclave, 30 individuals (52.8%) preferred during the National FFA Convention, 19 individuals (33.3%) during the NAAE Conference, and 8 individuals (14%) had no preference. When asked about the likelihood of attending the ATA conclave if it moved to the NAAE Convention, 42.2% ($n = 24$) indicated they would be *Likely* or *Very Likely* to attend, while only 19.3% ($n = 11$) indicated that it would be *Unlikely* or *Very Unlikely* that they would attend. Twenty-two individuals (38.6%) were unsure.

Respondents also identified new opportunities that they would like to see offered during the ATA Conclave. These included professional development workshops ($n = 38$; 31.4%), networking opportunities ($n = 38$; 31.4%), social activities ($n = 38$; 31.4%), and additional contests ($n = 7$; 5.8%). We also asked about the benefits that they have gained through their involvement in ATA. Among the 57 respondents, the most commonly reported benefits of participating in ATA were professional networking and leadership development, each selected by 38 individuals (19.1%). These were followed by resume building (28 responses, 14.1%) and peer mentorship/community (27 responses, 13.6%). Travel opportunities and personal confidence were each noted by 24 participants (12.1%), while teaching-related skills were identified by 20 respondents (10.1%).

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The results of this study highlight that members of ATA deeply value their involvement in the organization, citing benefits such as professional networking, leadership development, and resume building, similar to other studies (Webber et al., 2013). However, participation in the ATA Conclave is hindered by barriers, including cost, timing, and scheduling conflicts with events at the National FFA Convention. Interestingly, while many respondents expressed a preference for keeping the Conclave at the National FFA Convention, they also indicated a strong desire for enhanced experiences—such as professional development workshops, networking events, and social activities—that are more readily available at the NAAE Convention. This reveals a contradiction between the preferred location and the desired outcomes, suggesting that members may not fully recognize the potential benefits of relocating the Conclave to a setting better equipped to meet their evolving needs.

To address these findings, we recommend piloting an ATA experience at the NAAE Convention, where members can access the opportunities they seek without the scheduling conflicts of the National FFA Convention. A targeted communication strategy should inform members of the benefits of this shift, and a hybrid or rotational model could balance tradition with innovation. Aligning the Conclave more closely with ATA’s mission and members’ professional goals will help ensure its continued relevance and impact.

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