

Every Member Counts: Exploring AAAE Student Membership

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Introduction and Literature Review

Graduate students benefit greatly from being involved in professional organizations (Mullen, 2000; Desmond & Symens, 1997), yet their involvement is often limited, undocumented, and undervalued (Delamont & Atkinson, 2001; Farley et al., 2011; Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Warwick & Kaiser, 2005). Involvement, defined as “the amount of physical and psychological energy the student devotes” (Astin, 1984, p. 300), is key to graduate student learning and professional development (Feldman et al., 2013; Mullen, 2000). Organizations like the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) provide critical opportunities for graduate students to develop professional identities, socialize into academia, and network professionally (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Golde, 1998; Mullen, 2000; Weidman et al., 2001). This is especially important since many skills such as presenting research, publishing in academic journals, and mentoring are learned outside formal graduate coursework (Desmond & Symens, 1997). Yet, lack of visibility and data on graduate student involvement limits these opportunities, despite students’ proven value in fostering organizational and institutional change (Guiffrida et al., 2012; Santiago, 2012). We argue this problem is even greater in our organization, as no known study has examined graduate student membership in AAAE. Our study sought to address this gap by exploring student membership in terms of their frequencies, institutional ratios, and AAAE regional comparisons to understand the involvement of graduate students in AAAE and why it matters. Three objectives supported our purpose: 1) Identify the number of student members in the AAAE 2) Calculate the ratio of student members per institution 3) Compare the ratio of student members across the three AAAE regions.

Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by Alexander Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement (SI), which is defined as the energy, both physical and psychological, a student invests in their college experience. SI explains how students in higher education evolve and change over time as they participate in co-curricular activities (Astin, 1984). A form of involvement for graduate students is to join professional organizations, which opens doors to networking, professional development, and the pursuit of new opportunities. Student members mature as they participate in AAAE conferences, professional development, and mentorship.

Methodology

We employed Exploratory Data Analysis (EDA) and secondary analysis to gather data on AAAE membership to pursue this study’s purpose and its objectives. We applied EDA to identify distributions, outliers, and anomalies, which enabled us to visualize the data through graphical representations (Komorowski et al., 2016). Likewise, secondary data analysis granted us a comprehensive understanding of the data and set up a structure for the running frequency tables of the variables we had access to (Cheng & Phillips, 2014).

We conducted our study by analyzing data processed from the AAAE Directory to determine student membership frequencies, student membership within the institutions in AAAE, and how AAAE regions compare to each other in terms of student membership. For this study, institutions that are listed to have a master's and PhD degree in Agricultural Education

were considered according to the AAAE Degree Resource posted for public access on the AAAE website (Kleinjan & Marx, 2018). The sample population of institutions ($N = 17$) were selected based on the criteria they offer Master's and PhD degrees in Agricultural Education. We then imported the data into RStudio for investigation. We filtered the data to analyze the number of student memberships by each region and institution. We then analyzed the number of institutions in each region to compare them.

Results

The data collection from the AAAE Directory resulted in 105 student memberships reported for the 2024-2025 academic year from the sample population. The Western region leads with 62 student memberships, followed by the North Central region with 28 student memberships and the Southern region with 15 student memberships. The North Central Region report includes eight institutions: Iowa State University, Pennsylvania State University, Purdue University, The Ohio State University, University of Missouri, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and West Virginia University. In contrast, the Western region report includes five institutions: Oklahoma State University, Oregon State University, Texas A&M University, Texas Tech University, and Utah State University. Western region institutions averaged 12.4 AAAE student memberships, while North Central institutions averaged 3.5 AAAE student memberships. Out of 615 total AAAE members, 17% of the membership is listed as students associated with 17 out of the 99 institutions reported in the Agricultural Education Institution, AAAE Degree Resource document (Kleinjan & Marx, 2018). Texas Tech reported the highest student membership with 27 students; this represents 25.7% of the AAAE student membership from the sample population.

Conclusions

Our study provides a first look at the current state of student membership in AAAE. While the data available was limited, our findings highlight important trends in student involvement across AAAE institutions and regions. Notably, the higher average of student members per institution in the Western region suggested that while some institutions are highly engaged, many are underrepresented. This baseline data offers a starting point for understanding graduate student engagement in AAAE and signals a need for more accurate and consistent tracking of student membership across all AAAE institutions.

Implications and Recommendations

For further research to continue, we recommend the association add a layer to the AAAE student membership of degree program type, Masters, Undergraduate or PhD. We are interested in investigating the work-life balance established by graduate students that are parents in our next study. Since the beginning of our project, the institute and degree list used for data analysis has been updated and revised thanks to Dr. Jason Headrick, Texas Tech University and graduate students Kameron Rinehart, Ph.D., Hoyt Nebgen, M.S., Taylor Limbaugh, & Alexa Salinas, M.S. and the Member Services committee. The updated Discipline and Degree Directory can be found in excel format on the AAAE website. In combination with an updated directory layer, this will give more clarity and insight to how students are involved in AAAE.

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