

**Growing Future Educators: Investigating The Impacts of the University of Florida's Ag Ed
Institute**

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Introduction

The shortage of highly qualified agriculture educators is not a new phenomenon. Across the nation, there is a deficit of agriculture teachers (Foster et al., 2022). Challenges in school-based agricultural education (SBAE) that continue to affect recruitment and retention efforts of educators include funding for programs, concerns surrounding pay, licensure requirements, and a continued need to tackle the lack of diverse representation in the agricultural education field (Foster et al., 2022). University agriculture teacher educators are faced with difficulties recruiting high school students to their preservice agricultural education program (Gates et. al, 2020). These programs are working hard through grants to recruit students despite the challenge to meet the demand of agriculture educators and prevent additional SBAEs from closing. The National Teach Ag Campaign and National Association of Agriculture Educators (NAAE) have helped to create key initiatives to recruit and retain agriculture educators (Guffey & Young, 2020). Universities have utilized strategies to promote the agricultural education program to attract more students into the programs. These recruitment programs were established in 2009 after an initiative with the National Council of Agricultural Education, National Association of Agriculture Educators (NAAE), and the National FFA Foundation to bring awareness to the growing demand for educators (Guffey & Young, 2020). This study helps contribute to efforts to improve recruitment of agricultural educators.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influences of the University of Florida's Ag Ed Institute (AEI) on students' decisions to teach agriculture. The following two objectives guided this study: investigate students' level of participation in AEI and explore how the program has influenced participants' decision to pursue a career teaching agriculture.

Theoretical Framework

This study was rooted in the Social Cognitive Theory as the framework to explore the effectiveness of the Ag Ed Institute. Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory focuses on how our choices are influenced by our beliefs and capabilities (Bandura, 1997). This theory is broken down into three components: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals. The Social Cognitive Theory of Careers stems from Banduras' Social Cognitive Theory as the theory takes the three components of Social Cognitive Theory and applies them specifically to career development (Bandura, 1977). With AEI's primary goal of exposing students to a career in agricultural education, The Social Cognitive Theory of Careers provides a relevant framework to understand how students' self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal and career goals influence their decision regarding a career in agricultural education.

Methods

The Ag Ed Institute is a recruitment program for preservice teachers that was established in 2013 within the Agricultural Education and Communication at the University of Florida. The Ag Ed Institute was designed to address the issue of recruitment and retention of agricultural teachers as part of the National Teach Ag Campaign. The AEI was developed to develop students' interests within the agricultural education profession and to help meet the growing demand for agricultural educators within the Florida. The explanatory method was used, beginning with a survey and followed by interviews. Qualtrics was utilized as the platform to survey participants about their experience with AEI. The second phase included interviews that

were designed to provide a deeper explanation alongside the survey data. The explanatory method was used to help explain in more detail the quantitative data that was collected (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The target population for this study included participants from AEI during the 2021-2022, 2022-2023, and 2023-2024 program years. After removing incomplete responses, 13 out of 126 potential participants completed the survey, thus resulting in a 10% response rate. The survey included questions regarding demographics, participation in AEI, participation in specific aspects of the program, perceptions, and impact of the program. Some of the potential respondents were lost due to not meeting the minimum age of 18. The survey provided a space for respondents to enter their email address if willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview. Out of the six who provided their email, two respondents scheduled a time for an interview. Interviews were hosted via Zoom and lasted about twenty minutes. Semi-structured interviews included questions about participants' background, their entry into the program, motivation, career exploration, experiences within the program and perceived impacts, career intentions, factors influencing their participation, and recommendations for program improvement.

Results/Findings

For objective 1, respondents shared that they had participated in one or more of the following cohort groups: 2021-2022, (n = 8), 2022-2023 (n = 6) and/or 2023-2024 (n = 5). Of these respondents, six participated in subsequent cohorts. During these years, respondents attended one or more of the following sessions that were offered: Fall (n = 10), Spring (n = 4), State Convention (n = 13). Of the data collected, four respondents attended only one session, seven attended two sessions, and three attended all three sessions.

For objective 2, respondents answered statements regarding the program's impact and their perceptions, using a five-point Likert scale that varied according to question. Respondents' interest in studying agricultural education increased after AEI, with a $M = 4.50$, $SD = .78$. Participants also shared a strong desire to teach agriculture after the program, with a $M = 4.58$, $SD = .67$. Participants in AEI had a more favorable perception of a career teaching agriculture ($M = 4.42$, $SD = .79$) after participation. These findings align with the interviews, highlighting career affirmation and reinforcement of AEI's role in shaping the students' decision to pursue agricultural education. Participants made comments such as "I felt very equipped before I came to UF that I know what my major was... I think Ag Ed Institute played a really big role in that" and "I met a few of the professors at AEI... it was encouraging for them to be supportive from the start".

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although this study indicates that AEI had a positive impact on shaping students' decision to pursue a career in agricultural education, there is still space to increase participation. The shift in kicking off the program in the Fall on campus has increased participation in the fall sessions. Almost 50% of respondents continued the program for multiple years, showing their continued interest in the program. Researchers recognize the low response rate and limitations on the generalizability of these findings. To increase the response rates in the future, program leaders should ensure that a non-school issued email address is collected to help increase the ability to follow up with participants. It's also recommended that program coordinators share that follow up with participants will occur in the future. Similar university departments should explore the addition of a program like AEI to help support student interest in teaching agriculture and help ease the burden of navigating university admissions and career expectations.

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