

Career Intentions of LDE Competitors

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Introduction

Research indicates that involvement in extracurricular activities plays a critical role during the high school years. High school is also when adolescents begin exploring their interests and identifying pursuits that can positively influence their future career aspirations (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003). Agricultural education programs often foster a strong sense of responsibility among participants (Phipps et al., 2008) and participation in the FFA student organization provides numerous opportunities for students to engage in experiences that strengthen their communication abilities (Phipps et al., 2008). These are all skills that have a positive impact on career success. Participation in FFA events has been shown to strengthen students' vocational identity and professional aspirations (Talbert & Balschweid, 2004). Overall, the FFA provides students with a physical and emotional sense of belonging and does so by building the self-confidence and self-esteem within its members (Rose et al., 2016). As students prepare speeches, defend positions, and engage with agricultural advocacy topics, they begin to connect their personal interests with real-world career possibilities (Torres, Ulmer, & Abrams, 2008).

Theoretical Framework

This study guided by the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 1994). SCCT provides a framework for understanding how individuals develop career interests, set goals and make career-related decisions. The theory emphasizes self-efficacy, outcome expectations and personal goals. Within this model, self-efficacy represents a person's belief in their ability to perform specific tasks, outcome expectations refer to anticipated results from performing those tasks and goals represent intentions to engage in activities leading to desired outcomes. Together, these components explain how individuals translate their experiences and beliefs into purposeful career directions. SCCT serves as an appropriate framework for interpreting how experiential learning opportunities influence students' career confidence.

Methods

The sample population for this study was high school FFA members competing at an invitational Leadership Development Events (LDE) contest. This event was housed at a Southern Regional Institution, serving primarily students from South Texas. This study used an undergraduate student researcher developed survey, focusing on career intention and motivations. This was an eight questions instrument that asked basic demographic questions and questions related to career intention and motivations. The instrument was reviewed for validity by two graduate students, two faculty and two high school agriculture instructors. Surveys were completed online through a link using the SurveyMonkey online assessment after students scanned a QR code. Before attendance to the event; participants and advisors completed both a photo release waiver & survey permission form. Caution should be taken when making any inferences beyond the sample population. We collected 107 responses from a total of 160 contestants. This resulted in a response rate of 66%. The respondents included Seniors (27.9%), sophomores (26.9%), juniors (26.0%) and freshmen (19.2%); while 66.7% ($n = 70$) identified as female and 33.3% ($n = 35$) identified as male. Over half (51.9%) of the students identified as Hispanic, 26.9% identified as White and 20.2% as Mixed Race.

Findings

Students were asked to indicate their intended plans following graduation. The majority (75.5% ($n = 80$)) indicated that they planned to attend a university, 14.2% ($n = 15$) planned to attend a trade school and 6.6% ($n = 7$) planned to enter the workforce directly.

Agricultural and Research Careers, including both agriculture science research and production agriculture, was the leading career interest with 33.3% ($n = 27$) selecting one or both categories. healthcare (29.63%, $n = 24$) and veterinary medicine (27.16%, $n = 22$) followed closely. Engineering (22.22%, $n = 18$) and business/entrepreneurship (16.05%, $n = 13$) were also highly rated career choices. Lower interest was found related to careers in wildlife/range management (13.58%, $n = 11$), law enforcement (13.58%, $n = 11$), and education (12.35%, $n = 10$). Students were asked to rate various factors influencing their career choices on a five-point Likert-type scale. These findings are presented in table one.

Table One
Factors that Influence Career Choice

Factor	M	SD
Personal Interest/Passion	4.48	0.91
Job Availability/Stability	4.10	0.94
Salary/Earning Potential	3.91	1.05
Location	3.53	1.22
Family Expectations	3.03	1.44

Conclusions & Recommendations

The population of this study were predominantly female, Hispanic, and college-bound. Their FFA involvement included a range of leadership events. Students appear to be intrinsically motivated, driven by personal interests and perceived career opportunities rather than external pressures. These findings underscore the role of FFA experiences in fostering academic ambition, leadership skills, and informed career exploration among high school students engaged in agricultural education.

Students planned on careers connected to agricultural health, engineering, and service-based professions. The findings of this study align closely with the key propositions of SCCT. The connection between FFA participation and interest in these applied science careers suggests that students' confidence and skill mastery contribute directly to their career intentions. The data suggest that student career intentions are heavily concentrated in applied science fields, particularly those related to agriculture, animal health, and human healthcare. Relatively lower interest in trades, energy, and direct production roles may reflect broader societal trends emphasizing professional careers over manual labor. This suggests a potential need for educators and agricultural programs to more clearly articulate the technological sophistication and career advancement opportunities that exist within production agriculture and the skilled trades.

Future research should further explore the relationship between FFA participation, self-efficacy, and long-term career persistence. Longitudinal studies tracking students beyond high school could provide insight into whether early FFA involvement translates into sustained career engagement and professional success. Agricultural educators should intentionally design classroom and FFA experiences that connect technical agricultural skills to broader, high-demand career pathways in science, health, and engineering.

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