

**Leading the Way? A Look at FFA Engagement vs. Other CTSOs for College of
Agricultural and Life Sciences Undergraduates at the University of Florida**

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Introduction/Framework

The Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU), employers, and faculty have identified a skills gap among those entering the workforce (APLU, 2020). A goal of career and technical education (CTE) and the associated Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSOs) is for students to gain technical, employability, and workforce skills while having improved academics (Baillieul & Crowder, 2021; Doolittle & Camp, 1999; Stone III, 2024). FFA—a CTSO grounded in experiential learning—prepares students for career success through premier leadership and personal growth (National FFA Organization, 1952). Students enrolled in school-based agricultural education (SBAE) and members of the FFA have many opportunities to practice and experience skills associated with leadership development (Mullins & Weeks, 2006). Experiential learning commonly occurs in secondary education within CTE courses, including FFA, typically offer opportunities for students to engage in hands-on activities and develop skills desired by industry (Brand et al., 2013; Stone III, 2024). Learning in the classroom is not always experiential, but when connected with CTSOs opportunities, students can apply what they learn by doing, thus reinforcing the learning cycle (Roberts, 2006).

Experiential learning allows students to learn and reflect through impactful experiences (Roberts, 2006), such as CTSOs. Experiential learning has four components, initial experience, reflection, application, and conceptualization (Coleman et al., 2024). For this study, the initial experience is the engagement of students in CTSOs, the reflection includes what or whom influenced students to become engaged with the organization, then constructing an idea and attitude of their engagement, application of knowledge gained, and continued engagement based on previous experience (Coleman et al., 2024). Students continue to enact in experiential learning by having experiences where they will continue to apply skills and knowledge (Coleman et al., 2024).

Purpose & Methods

The purpose of this study was to compare student engagement skill perceptions of those in FFA compared to other CTSOs. The data reported and results of this study are part of a larger study being conducted to evaluate student engagement in CTSOs and collegiate student organizations. We sampled undergraduate students enrolled during the Fall of 2025 with a major in the the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALs) at the University of Florida. The instrument used was developed using Dillman et al.'s (2014) method. The online questionnaire included statements related to the perceived impact of CTSOs and collegiate student organizations, leadership opportunities, and college and career readiness skills. We conducted a pilot study to test the validity and reliability of the overall instrument. Additionally, a team of three experts reviewed the instrument to ensure all questions and statements within the survey were valid, applicable, and related to the purpose and objectives.

We created the survey using Qualtrics and distributed it to all CALs undergraduate students through a listserv. The survey was sent out by the CALs director of student development and recruitment, to increase student response rates. Data was collected between September 10-October 8, 2025. Within CALs, 474 surveys were completed in their entirety and provided usable data out of 4054 email recipients. Of the respondents, 28.3% ($n= 134$) of students were engaged in a CTSO in high school and 71.7% ($n = 340$) were not in a CTSO. Business Professionals of America (BPA), Distributive Education Clubs of America (DECA), Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA), Family, Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA), The National FFA Organization (FFA), Health Occupations Students of America

(HOSA-Future Health Professionals), SkillsUSA, National Professional Agricultural Student (PAS), and Technology Student Association (TSA) were the nine CTSOs used in this study (CTSO, 2018). Overwhelmingly, FFA had the highest primary participation of CTSO at 52.2% ($n= 70$) of CALS students engaged in CTSOs. The analysis included descriptive statistics, reporting means and standard deviations. Additionally, a paired t-test was run to compare responses of groups.

Results/findings

This study aimed to determine student perceptions of CTSOs and their ability to develop workforce, technical, and employability skills through extracurricular activities. Students were asked a series of questions regarding their perceptions of skills development through involvement. Table 1 reports means and standard deviations for each item, as well as significance.

Table 1

Students' perceptions of skill development in FFA ($n = 70$) and other CTSOs ($n = 64$).

	FFA	Other CTSO	
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>p</i>
Gained leadership experience.	4.79 (.45)	4.06 (1.12)	<.001
Gained technical skills (i.e., public speaking, laboratory procedures, communication development, management, 3-way switch).	4.73 (.68)	4.13 (1.10)	<.001
CTSO allowed me to gain real-world experiences.	4.64 (.72)	4.05 (1.16)	<.001
CTSO(s) allowed me to gain employability skills (i.e., soft skills, decision-making, teamwork, collaboration, communication, and leadership).	4.60 (.73)	4.16 (1.04)	.005
CTSO(s) allowed me to gain workforce skills (i.e., technological skills, reading, and writing).	4.47 (.83)	3.89 (1.14)	<.001

Note. Responses are on a scale of (1) *Strongly disagree*, (2) *Somewhat disagree*, (3) *Neutral*, (4) *Somewhat agree*, (5) *Strongly agree*.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

The findings of this study report that students in FFA believe they are more prepared for their future careers than those engaged in other CTSOs. Students engaged in CTSOs are reporting positive experiences and agree that CTSOs aid in developing their skills that are desired by the workforce (APLU, 2020). Respondents reported significantly different responses to each question, but all are higher perceptions. Among responses, FFA students reported a smaller standard deviation, indicating lower variation in responses. We recommend that FFA advisors, parents, stakeholders, and state affiliations continue to offer opportunities for students to develop their skills. Other organizations should attempt to offer similar opportunities for students to build their workforce, technical, and employability skills while gaining leadership and real-word experiences. For future research, we recommend exploring what experiences are unique and beneficial in FFA to expand other CTSOs.

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