

Factors Impacting Members Decision to Continue FFA Beyond High School

Danielle E. Sanok¹, Christopher T. Stripling², Carrie A. Stephens³, and Andrew P. Griffith⁴

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the factors influencing FFA members to continue their FFA experience beyond high school. Two focus groups were conducted, one for collegiate FFA members and one for past/current state officers. Participants provided several areas of improvement for collegiate and alumni FFA membership. Participants noted a lack of advertising from the FFA during high school regarding opportunities for involvement after high school, stated their advisor played an influential role in deciding to continue with FFA, and expressed FFA needed to put forth greater efforts into career building opportunities for collegiate members. Also, participants noted factors such as the desire to give back, safe environment, opportunities to learn about agriculture, and the “FFA Family” as reasons for continuing involvement. State officer participants gave additional insights to why they continued with FFA, including helping members overcome barriers and wanting to serve others. To increase membership beyond high school, we recommend professional development to help advisors promote FFA, evaluation on advertising efforts and increasing advertisements, develop program guidelines outlining how collegiate chapters can accomplish their mission and host events aimed at personal development, and publish best practices on leading a successful alumni chapter.

Keywords: FFA; collegiate; alumni; non-profit organizations; youth motivation

The National FFA Organization develops programs around high school youth development and careers in agriculture (National FFA Organization, 2015a). Each year, the FFA spends over seven million dollars on the development and maintenance of programs for over half a million members (National FFA Foundation, 2012). FFA hosts conferences such as 212, 360, Washington Leadership Conference, Blast Off, State President’s Conference, and the National Leadership Conference for State Officers (NLCSO), all aimed at further developing the current, active member (National FFA, 2015b). The New Century Farmer Conference is currently FFA’s only conference aimed at developing the collegiate member (National FFA, 2015b). Powell and Agnew (2007) found student leaders in college are looking for more avenues to grow in leadership development, networking, and professional growth. Many university graduates believe leadership is important

¹ Danielle E. Sanok is a Graduate Assistant in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 320 Morgan Hall, 2621 Morgan Circle, Knoxville, TN 37996, dsanok@utk.edu

² Christopher T. Stripling is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 320 B Morgan Hall, 2621 Morgan Circle, Knoxville, TN 37996, cstripli@utk.edu

³ Carrie A. Stephens is a Professor in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 320 A Morgan Hall, 2621 Morgan Circle, Knoxville, TN 37996, cfritz@utk.edu

⁴ Andrew P. Griffith is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 314 B Morgan Hall, 2621 Morgan Circle, Knoxville, TN 37996, agriff14@utk.edu

to long-term success and active involvement in organizations such as FFA has proven to be effective at developing leadership skills (Powell & Agnew, 2007).

Rosch and Coers (2013) found student leadership on all levels of education can help positively impact young leaders. Schumacher and Swan (1993) found the demand for leadership training on the collegiate level was incredibly high. Furthermore, faculty and universities are facing challenges adapting to the changing needs (i.e., job readiness, career planning) of their students (Powell & Agnew, 2007). An outlet to meet these demands and needs by the students may be involvement in the Collegiate FFA and the FFA Alumni; as each year, high school FFA members graduate and attend universities that offer Collegiate FFA opportunities. According to Jim McCray (personal communication, January 29, 2015), Past National FFA Alumni President, FFA retains less than 40% of its current membership into alumni membership. Research has been conducted on reasons why high school FFA members continue with their involvement in high school (Allen, Ricketts, & Priest, 2007; Croom & Flowers, 2001a; Croom & Flowers, 2001c; Rosch & Coers, 2013; Rossetti, McCaslin, & Gliem, 1996; Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997; Smith, Garton, and Kitchel, 2007; Tuner & Herren, 1997), but research is sparse on the reasons why membership is continued past high school. This study will seek to determine the reasons why FFA members in Collegiate FFA and current and past state FFA officers continue with their FFA experiences past high school.

Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework

The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) postulates how perceived behavioral control, along with behavioral intent, can be used to predict behavioral outcomes, which could help predict the outcomes of a student on the collegiate and alumni level (Allen, Ricketts, & Priests, 2007). According to Ajzen (1991), general attitudes and personality traits are implications for human behavior and have the potential to broaden influence. Additionally, intention plays a central and large role in how a certain behavior will be performed (Ajzen, 1991). Intentions are motivational factors that can influence a behavior to occur, and they can indicate a person's work ethic, planning, and exertion to perform a certain behavior; therefore, the stronger the intention to engage in the behavior, the more likely the performance of that desired outcome will be (Ajzen, 1991).

Ajzen (1991) found motivation and ability also have significant effects on the behavioral achievement of outcomes. The resources and available opportunities to a person will dictate the likelihood of the behavioral achievement (Ajzen, 1991). Motivation and ability is also influenced by a person's perceived behavioral control, which is how a person perceives the desired performing behavior (Ajzen, 1991). When perceived behavioral control is paired with behavioral intentions, together, they can predict behavioral achievement (Ajzen, 1991).

Past behaviors can be possible indicators of future behaviors. Attitudes can be linked to past experiences, and attitudes are indicators of future behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Past behaviors are not a direct measure of a person's habit, but a reflection of factors that could help determine a person's behavioral interest (Ajzen, 1991). Each person will engage in their behavior of interest differently and will act accordingly based on their past experiences, attitudes, and beliefs.

Beyond Ajzen (1991), Terenzini and Reason's (2005) model of influences on student learning could help further explain how the college experience factors into involvement in the collegiate and alumni FFA (Smith, Garton, & Kitchel, 2007). Terenzini and Reason stated that student success during their freshmen year can be influenced by their pre-college characteristics, overall college experience, and the desired outcome. The most powerful of these three categories is pre-college characteristics and experiences as they include socioeconomic status, ability and performance, personal experiences, and academic preparation (Smith, Garton, & Kitchel, 2007). Therefore, participation in youth organizations could impact student motivation and desire to learn in other ways during college (Smith et al., 2007).

Extracurricular activities provide numerous opportunities to apply classroom knowledge to real world settings (Allen, Ricketts, & Priest, 2007; Montelongo, 2002; Rosch & Coers, 2013). Allen, Ricketts, and Priest (2007) found extracurricular activities and leadership development programs such as the FFA have great potential to produce greater levels of self-confidence, self-motivation, and responsibility among participants. Rosch and Coers (2013) reported continuous leadership development throughout one's life contributes to a positive impact on the role of leaders in society. Furthermore, Montelongo (2002) found involvement in college student organizations and extracurricular activities benefits students beyond the classroom; participation increases students' sense of intellectual, social, and emotional self over time.

There are many reasons students join FFA, but some motives have been found to be more influential than others. Allen, Ricketts, and Priest (2007) reported students join FFA to meet their need for a sense of belonging. Furthermore, agricultural teachers and alumni often play vital roles for FFA enrollment, encouraging a positive FFA image, and influence members' personal leadership development (Greiman & Addington, 2008; Rossetti, McCaslin & Gliem, 1996; Smith, Garton and Kitchel, 2007). Sirkin and McDermott (1995) confirmed when an organization has a positive image students have a sense of a more satisfying life, which has the potential to increase membership and retention. Alumni can provide organizations and its members with important information they would not normally have access to such as how to overcome obstacles, becoming an involved alumni, and real-world benefits (Volkwein, 2010). Alumnus can be major recruitment tools and mentor members on how to become better leaders and effective, active alumnus in their respected organizations (Singer & Hughey, 2002; Volkwein, 2010).

Leadership development is another reason FFA members continue their high school FFA involvement (Rossetti, McCaslin, & Gliem, 1996). Anderson and Kim (2009) found high school students perceived leadership development to be important in preparing for college, involvement in other organizations, and their future careers. Moreover, they reported students place more importance on the areas and organizations in which they will receive more leadership education. FFA members also identified leadership conferences, contests, activities, and leadership positions as influential in developing their leadership potential (Ricketts & Rudd, 2004).

Furthermore, students have a high need for self-worth and self-identity, because they have a desire to participate in society (Weatherford, 1984). FFA provides students with a sense of empowerment and esteem through its support system and structured activities, which promote leadership development skills (McNally & Harvey, 2010). FFA members have a higher need for achievement, affiliation, and power within society (Tuner & Herren, 1997). FFA members also join and participate in FFA because FFA meets students' needs for increased self-esteem (Croom & Flowers, 2001a; Croom & Flowers, 2001c).

Within the FFA, there have been positive correlations between FFA participation and member's self-perception of leadership (Greiman, & Addington, 2008; Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997). High self-efficacy can promote positive outcomes in self-motivation and proactiveness among youth (McNally, 2001). Youth that have higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to make better informed decisions about certain behaviors and persevere during difficult situations and tasks (Bandura, 1986). The more leadership experiences students participate in, the more cognitive skills such as communication, critical thinking and leadership development skills improves over time (Ricketts, 2005).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore factors impacting Collegiate FFA members and current and past state FFA officers' decision to continue FFA membership after high school.

Methods and Procedures

Research Subjectivity

Four researchers were involved in this study: (a) an agricultural leadership and communication master's student (b) one assistant professor of agricultural education (c) one professor of agricultural leadership and education, and (d) one assistant professor of agricultural and resource economics. The master's student researcher has completed a bachelor's degree in agriculture education, continues to be active with the National FFA Organization, and is a former FFA State Officer. The assistant professor of agricultural education and professor of agricultural leadership and education are former school-based agricultural education teachers and have recently published works in the areas of leadership, STEM, education, and college instruction. Both have prior experience with qualitative data collection techniques, including facilitating focus groups, and have published qualitative works. The assistant professor of agricultural and resource economics is an Extension specialist with a focus area of risk management in production agriculture and has limited 4-H and FFA experience.

Collectively, we believe FFA members construct attitudes, beliefs and behaviors towards FFA involvement before they enter college. We believe intentions play a role in member's involvement in Collegiate FFA and/or FFA Alumni. We also believe precollege characteristics such as sociodemographics traits, academic preparation, and personal and social experiences are contributing factors in an FFA member deciding to continue with their FFA experience in college. These beliefs influenced and provided the basis for the theoretical lens of this study.

Research Design

A qualitative paradigm was chosen for this study. A main component of qualitative research is the focus and aim on aiding participants in making sense of their experiences (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2014). This study sought to understand why students continue with their FFA experience and what FFA could potentially do to improve a lifelong commitment to FFA. Thus, a basic qualitative research design was used. Basic qualitative studies "provide rich descriptive accounts targeted to understanding a phenomenon, a process, or a particular point of view from the perspective of those involved" (Ary et al., 2015, p. 484). The purpose of basic qualitative studies is to understand, describe and interpret the events, processes, and activities of participants (Ary et al., 2014).

Subjects

The target population for this study was undergraduate students who were Collegiate FFA members and/or current or past state officer at the University of Tennessee. There were 40 Collegiate FFA members and 8 current or past state officers attending the University of Tennessee during the 2014-2015 academic year. Subjects were selected from the target population for focus groups based on availability and *a priori* selection criteria. Selection criteria were as follows: (a) be a past FFA member in high school and a current collegiate FFA member or (b) be a past FFA member in high school and current or past FFA state officer. Subjects who were available and willing to participate were divided into two focus groups: (a) Collegiate FFA and (b) past or current state officers. The Collegiate FFA focus group consisted of nine females, all agricultural majors. There were five freshmen, two sophomores, one junior, and one senior. The state officer focus group consisted of seven participants, all agricultural majors, which consisted of four freshmen, one sophomore, one junior, and one senior. There were five females and two males.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Data were collected using focus groups. Focus groups allowed students to bounce ideas off of each other to truly have a beneficial reflection experience (Ary et al., 2014). This also allowed the researcher to ask probing questions based on participants' responses. The focus groups were approximately 55 minutes in length and were conducted at the University of Tennessee. A semi-structured interview guide was developed for each focus group by the researchers. The use of semi-structure interview guides allowed for a better explanation of the phenomenon and participants' experiences (Ary et al., 2014). The following questions represented the researcher-developed semi-structured interview guides:

Current FFA Members Focus Group Questions

1. Why did you decide to join the FFA?
2. Who or what was the major influence for you to join FFA?
3. Please explain who discussed with you additional opportunities with the FFA past high school and where? For instance, agricultural teacher or any person at a state convention, national convention, or leadership conference, and so forth.
4. Did you enjoy your FFA experience in high school? Why or why not?
5. What influenced you to stay involved in FFA after high school?
6. Do you believe FFA has enough opportunities for students? Why or why not?
7. After college, do you believe you will join the FFA alumni? Why or why not?

Current or Past FFA State Officers Focus Group Questions

1. Why did you decide to join the FFA?
2. Who or what was the major influence for you to join FFA?
3. Please explain who discussed with you additional opportunities with the FFA past high school and where? For instance, agricultural teacher or any person at a state convention, national convention, or leadership conference, and so forth.
4. Did you enjoy your FFA experience in high school? Why or why not?
5. Why did you decide to be a state officer?
6. Will you continue with the FFA after being a state officer? Why or why not?
7. Do you believe the FFA has enough opportunities for members past high school? Please explain your reasoning.
8. Please explain your reasoning for continuing or discontinuing your involvement with the FFA Alumni in the future.

Data Analyses and Trustworthiness

The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The individual participants were assigned a student number (S1, S2, etc.) and the state officers were assigned a different letter number combination (T1, T2, etc.) to protect their identities. Data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method, which allowed the researchers to curtail the data and “focus on repeated words of phrases...or evidence of answers to the research question/s which have been devised” (Grbich, 2007, p. 32). This will allow the data to “speak for themselves” (Grbich, 2007, p. 32), before the researchers have the opportunity to pre-assign themes. Furthermore, we used the block and file approach to conduct the thematic analysis (Grbich, 2007). After reading through the transcribed data multiple times, we organized the data into color-coded segments in order to categorize the data into themes. After the data was color-coded, researchers compared their coding and came to a consensus on emergent themes present in the data. The data were additionally

reexamined collectively to develop titles for each emergent theme. Finally, appropriate data were included as further evidence of each emergent theme.

According to Dooley (2007), “trustworthiness relates to the degree of confidence that the findings of the study represent the respondents and their context” (p. 38). Rigor and trustworthiness are obtained through the formulation of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Dooley, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexivity, investigator triangulation of data analyses, and using member checking during focus groups were used to ensure credibility of researchers’ observations, interpretations, and conclusions (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2014). Dependability, confirmability, and transferability were established by creating audit trails, literature comparisons, and detailed descriptions of methods (Ary et al., 2014). Furthermore, credibility and transferability were established using low-inference descriptors using verbatim and direct quotes from participants, as well as peer debriefing and investigator triangulation in order to help fully understand participants’ experience (Ary et al., 2014). In order to enhance trustworthiness, all focus groups were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word. Once the transcriptions were completed, audio recordings were listened to for a second time for increased accuracy. A methodological limitation of this study was the data were collected from only students at the University of Tennessee and their experiences may not be representative of other populations who have continued FFA membership beyond high school.

Findings

Data analysis revealed several themes to help explain why FFA members continue with their FFA experience beyond high school. Common themes were (a) role of the advisor, (b) advertisement of Collegiate and Alumni FFA in high school, (c) personal relationships, (d) personal development, (e) priority of FFA in members’ lives, (f) ideas for improvement, and state officer trends which included (g) experiences in high school, (h) perceptions of FFA role after year of service as a state officer, and (i) why FFA loses members after high school.

Role of the Advisor

The most prominent reason why participants were influenced to stay involved with the FFA in high school and in college was because of encouragement from their advisor (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, T2, T3, T4). Both Collegiate FFA members and State Officers noted their advisor(s) had a lasting impact on their overall FFA experience, but the type of experience varied. Some participants noted their advisors did not push or encourage them in ways they desired. Participant 3 noted their advisor only pushed for obtaining their American Degree, but never further involvement with Collegiate FFA. Two participants joined FFA because they made a prior connection with their FFA advisor (S4, S8). Many participants stated their advisor was a major influence to their continued involvement with the FFA in high school (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, T2, T3, T4). State officer participants 2 and 4 expressed their advisor(s) encouraged participation in public speaking events, active involvement, leadership roles and “knowing that he believed in me from the very beginning is kind of what kept me involved” (T2). Participants expressed their advisor(s) held them accountable, acting as a “second set of parents at school” (S1) and this benefited them greatly, furthering their involvement (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5).

Participant 2 noted their advisor would continuously ask students about their life plans and if they considered a career in agriculture, which encouraged Participant 2 to study agriculture in college. Participant 4 had a similar experience, as their “advisor prodded me a lot...both of his daughters were really involved in CFFA whenever they went off to school...he knew it would be really good for me”. Participant 6 also expressed their advisor encouraged FFA participation by making FFA a part of life – “He not only encouraged me to be a part of Collegiate FFA here at the University of Tennessee because he was when he was here, but also to go into agriculture education

and be a part of it throughout life, kind of to push it to the next level.” Participant 8 expressed similar sentiments, “my teachers and my advisors and like the State Officers, didn’t really know a lot about University of Tennessee and didn’t really push for like doing it in college, but they definitely pushed for my life, like my career being in agriculture and like just continuing in like promoting FFA throughout my life.”

Advertisement of Collegiate and Alumni FFA in High School

When discussing if participants had heard and/or seen any advertising for FFA opportunities past high school, results varied greatly. Some participants expressed they do not remember anyone deliberately talking specifically about FFA opportunities past high school (S1, S3, S5, S8, T1, T2). Other than their advisor, participants had been exposed to FFA opportunities past high school at state and national conventions (S1, S4, S5, S7), at conferences (S7), at involvement fairs on campus (S1, S3), and through others’ involvement (S1, S4, S5, S9, T1, T2, T3, T6, T7). Participant 7 felt “everybody talked about once you go to school like you don’t have to stop [with FFA] after you graduate, you can still go and you can still get degrees and stuff.” Participant 1 stated chapter members who had graduated would come “back home to visit our chapters or whatever, they would talk to us” about being involved in Collegiate FFA. Participant 4 expressed they felt the constant presence of Collegiate FFA on social media stating, “another thing that kind of helped me get into CFFA was a lot of people I am friends with like on Facebook and Twitter, they would share stuff like that they were doing with CFFA and so I would see pictures and stuff, and go ‘oh that looks really fun, I should do that!’” Participant 5 agreed with both participants expressing “my chapter’s alumni that were in Collegiate FFA, seeing their Facebook posts and what not and what they were doing” informed them that “there are four more years for it for me, at least!” Remaining participants sought to be involved with FFA past high school when they did not hear about opportunities and did so by attending involvement fairs and seeking information once arriving on campus (S2, S4, S6).

Some participants expressed concern about the lack of communication about opportunities for FFA past high school, especially on the collegiate level (S3, S7, T4, T7). Participant 3 believed FFA has to improve communication as “you have already heard all of us except one person say that nobody came and talked to them to join CFFA. Like that’s a problem” and goes on to say “you just don’t hear of CFFA things going on, so I think that everybody needs to work harder to get the word out.” Participant 2 stated they did not know their university had a Collegiate FFA until being informed by a friend on campus. State officer participants also expressed they did not know what Collegiate FFA was or the purpose of the organization until they were state officers because no one had ever communicated the information to them (T4, T7). Participants also noted lack of communication about FFA opportunities past high school may be a reason why members do not join Collegiate FFA or FFA alumni (S8, T2, T7).

Personal Relationships

Participants noted they initially joined FFA and continued their involvement because of the various personal relationships the FFA provides. Family played a key role in the initial reason why participants joined the FFA (S2, S5, T3, T4, T6, and T7); older siblings, grandparents, cousins, or parents influenced some participants’ involvement. Other participants joined FFA in high school because of the opportunities to learn about agriculture, especially careers in agriculture (S8, T1, T4). Two participants joined because of friends (S6, S7). Two joined because of an advisor (S4, S8). One participant joined because of recruitment efforts by current FFA members (S3). One participant joined because their involvement in 4-H transitioned them into FFA participation (S1). State officer participants 4 and 7 were influenced by family to either join Collegiate FFA or become a state officer.

Participants continued their involvement in high school and college because of the “FFA family” (S1, S2, S3, S5, T6, T7) created throughout their experiences. Through the “FFA family” participants made connections (S1, T6) and felt the sense of belonging (S1, S4). Participant 2 expressed being around “the same people who have the same interest and like competing in CDE’s and serving on an officer team with the same people, it just makes you, they are your family and like they support you and encourage.” Participants enjoyed being around those who had similar agricultural interests (S2, S3, S9). Through the “FFA family” participants made friends and noted friend making as an influence to continue involvement (S6, S7, S9, T6, T7). State officer participant 6 stayed involved because of the network built across the nation – “I could make a lot of different friends, like me, from across the nation. It was the friendly networking aspect and building those relationships that I would go on to continue them for years and year from there, today even, that really kept me engaged.”

This sentiment continued for many participants in college. Most notably, participants enjoyed being in Collegiate FFA because they relished being around individuals (S1, S3, S4, S5, S6, S8, S9) who shared common interests, beliefs, and “a passion for agriculture (S1).” Participants expressed because they were constantly surrounded by likeminded individuals, Collegiate FFA was a “safe place” (S1, S3, S5) where “your opinion and your lifestyle, and your passion are safe and you all kind of feel the same way” (S1) and were surrounded by “people that actually appreciate all the work that agriculture does for our lives” (S3). Participants felt they were able to learn more from likeminded individuals and a safe environment (S2, S4, S6, S8).

Collegiate FFA participants said they enjoyed the personal relationships they were now making with high school members as participants have the opportunity to give back to high school chapters (S1, S3, S4, S6, and S7). Participant 1 felt satisfaction helping provide high school members with a beneficial FFA experience – “makes me feel good that I can make sure they get those experiences that really helped me out in my life and now help them out.” Others continued with FFA in college because involvement was “something I could hold onto” (S6, S7, S8) from high school and back home, providing safety and security to participants.

Personal Development

Personal development was one of the main incentives for continued involvement with FFA in high school and in college. Some participants expressed they stayed involved in FFA in high school because of career development events as they were able to learn new concepts, find their career path through career development events and meet new people from competing (S2, S5, S7, S9). This continued in college as participants expressed enjoying competing in collegiate events (S2, S5). Some participants were not willing to let go of their FFA experience because of how FFA developed them as an individual. Some participants chose to be involved with Collegiate FFA because of the positive and lasting impact FFA had on their lives (S3, S8) and “it was not something I was willing to give up just because I had already put my 4 years in” (S3). Some participants just felt it was natural to continue with involvement and did not give much thought to being involved as the FFA was what they had always done (S5, S9) with Participant 5 stating, “I really didn’t put much thought into it, it was just what I had always done and people that I went to high school with were involved with it here and so it was just continuing on with what I had always done.”

Participants stated FFA helped change their lives, which was a motivating factor to continue involvement after high school and into college. Participants stayed involved with the FFA in high school because FFA helped raise their confidence (S4, S5) and gave them the opportunity to succeed and improve (S3, S4, S5, S7). Participant 3 expressed that as their involvement grew, so did their self-confidence, public speaking skills, and the ability to relate to others. Participants expressed FFA helped to change their life (S5, S7, T6), especially in the areas of choosing a career path (S5, S7, S8, T5). Participant 5 stated, “It also helped me choose my career path for college. I thought my entire life I wanted to do one career and then I did one contest my senior year and I just

changed my entire life around and I am very happy with that. So the FFA has given my confidence, it has given my personality; it has driven me on the path that I really want to go on”.

While participants noted the FFA helped to develop interests in careers in agriculture, participants continually expressed the FFA did not provide enough career building opportunities for collegiate and alumni members. Overwhelmingly, participants felt Collegiate FFA is more of a social organization (T2, T5, T7) and needs to provide more opportunities to build skills sets, career opportunities, and provide a working end goal for its members (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, T1, T2, T3, T4 T5, T6, T7). Participant 1 believed members continue with FFA because they appreciate how FFA developed them in high school but “there are so many other organizations that are working towards building their skills sets or building their career network,” which they believed Collegiate FFA currently does not provide. Participants 3, 4, and 5 were apprehensive to join Collegiate FFA because they felt the organization does not provided enough career building opportunities, but like other participants, stayed involved in Collegiate FFA because of the “FFA Family” involvement in high school events, and being able to recruit at conventions.

Priority of FFA in Members’ Lives

When asked if FFA would remain a priority in their lives, participants had varying answers. Participants were asked if they would join the FFA Alumni and some stated yes, they were already a member (S2, S9, T2, T5), some stated they would join in the future (S4, S5, T1), others identified yes, if they could start an alumni chapter back home (S1, S6), one was unsure (S8), some specified that would depend on life circumstance and the time commitment (S3, S7, S9), some current state officers said they did not think about joining since they are currently state officers (T1, T3, T4), one would prefer involvement with the FFA Foundation rather than FFA Alumni (T7), and one participant had no intention of furthering their involvement (T5).

Ideas for Improvement

Participants expressed there are some improvements they would like Collegiate FFA to make. Participants suggested there would be greater incentive to continue involvement if the FFA focused more on member growth past high school (S1, S2, S6, S8). Participants 1 and 2 expressed while they value giving back to high school chapters, they would like to see “our focus back to our members” (S1) and suggested more group activities and interacting with members. Participants noted not all Collegiate FFA chapters are consistently strong across the nation, and may be a reason why members do not make a priority to join (S5, S6) and suggested there be a national standard of operation for all collegiate chapters.

When asked if Collegiate FFA provided enough opportunities, a majority of participants stated yes (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S8, S9) but after probing deeper, participants’ explanations indicated otherwise. Some participants noted since they are freshmen, they are still learning what Collegiate FFA is and how they want to be involved (S3, T5, T7). Participants also felt there were similar amounts of opportunities but now with a different focus (S5, S6, S9, T7). Some participants felt their chapter was still improving or needed improving in certain opportunity areas (S1, S2, T5). Participant 1 expressed more education opportunities such as farm visits or learning about agriculture as a chapter would be beneficial professionally and socially.

Participants felt other members do not take advantage of the opportunities FFA has to offer (S6, S8, S9, T2). Participant 8 stated members do not put in effort to truly benefit from Collegiate FFA – “a lot of collegiate members will go to conventions just to have fun and hang ...they don’t pour the effort back into bettering themselves and taking those opportunities.” Participant 6 felt members do not take advantage of the opportunities because there is no one to hold them accountable like their advisors did in high school. Participant 9 agreed expressing if “you don’t choose to take advantage of it (opportunities), then you know it’s on you.” Some participants

believed the reason why members do not take advantage of these opportunities is because they find difficulty fitting opportunities into their busy schedules and admitted to not taking advantage of opportunities for that reason (S5, S8, T2, T7).

State Officer Trends

The state officer focus group had some notable differences in their overall FFA experience which will be highlighted in this section.

Experiences in high school. Almost all state officers noted throughout their FFA experience they lacked confidence and self-worth (T3, T4, T5, T6, T7). Three state officers expressed their chapters did not have a good learning and mentoring environment from their advisor, so they sought FFA experiences outside of their chapter through state office (T5, T6, T7), which was perceived as an underlying reason for lack of confidence and self-worth. State officer participant 5 felt their advisor did not believe in them and “downplayed like the success of our chapter” so they tried to prove to their advisor that they were “capable of having success” by winning career development events and being involved in FFA outside of the chapter by becoming a state officer.

State officer participant 6 expressed they were influenced to stay involved because of FFA’s commitment to personal growth and development, outside of the chapter level, “When I was able to stick with FFA long enough to get outside of our local community...and find people that I was interested in getting to know better, who were interested in developing me as a man, as a leader, is when it really clicked for me.” Additionally, many state officers felt pressure to be involved from other family members’ involvement (T2, T3, T4, T6, T7), which could have been an indicator of low confidence, self-worth and an overall longing to succeed. From this overall lack of confidence and self-worth, they at times were unsure of their involvement and indicated there were times they wanted to quit FFA, but certain events like attending National Convention (T7), the Washington Leadership Conference (T6), being encouraged by other FFA members (T3, T4, T5) or being encouraged by an advisor (T3) influenced their decision to continue their involvement.

Participants noted they wanted to continue with their FFA experience past high school by being state officers because they wanted members to feel how they did when they were around state officers (T1, T3, T6, T7). State officer participant 6 stated, “I didn’t have a lot of confidence or self-worth on the inside...but it was the state officers, regional officers, trained state officer, national officer candidates, ... that would encourage me and saying that I do have what it takes to serve at that scope and that capacity. That is what convinced me ... and that I wanted to make other people that.” State officer participant 4 expressed they gained confidence through the FFA and “I wanted other people to have that and I want to be a part of why other people felt confident about themselves and could believe in themselves.” State officer participant 1 expressed similar sentiments stating state officers were real people that “wanted to be your friend and give you an encouraging word and I was really impacted by that and wanted to be that person. I wanted to be that person that went up and spoke to someone and made them stick with FFA.”

State officer participants also acknowledged that other people told them that they would be a good state officer, so they decided to run (T1, T3, T4, T6, T7).

Perceptions of FFA role after year of service as a state officer. State officer participants expressed their responsibilities change as members once they are done with their state officer year. They noted their involvement with Collegiate FFA has declined over the years (T2, T7) as they were really involved after being a state officer but participated less due to lack of time. Participants felt the need to limit their involvement with FFA, so they would not be the annoying past state officer (T1, T2, T4). They also did not want FFA to take “over their life” (T4) as they felt happens with other past state officers. State officer participant 6 responded contradictory, stating “I’d love to be a resource to any FFA member that could use help getting better in the future.”

State officer participants had mixed perceptions of what being involved on the alumni level entailed. State officer participants 2 and 5 indicated their officer team bought lifetime memberships during their officer year because “1. It’s something that we wanted to do and 2. It’s kind of like our responsibility...to show that you are a part of it” (T5). State officer participant 2 stated they paid their lifetime membership dues out of self-worth and wanting to give back to the organization, but only indicated giving back in the form of monetary value, not giving back time or service. State officer participant 5 felt their FFA alumni membership was their responsibility as a past state officer and was involved with alumni roles in college such as State Officer Prep courses, but they had no intention of being active in the alumni once they graduated from college. Current state officers also expressed they could not imagine life after being a state officer, so they had not yet considered their involvement past their year of service (T1, T3, T4).

Why FFA loses members after high school. State officer participants expressed FFA loses members for various reasons. Some expressed they think college is too big of a transition and members hitch onto anything different from high school because they are tired of being in a high school organization (T1, T7). Participants also noted FFA members even conveyed to them that they were “over” being in FFA (T1, T6, T7). Participant 6 also expressed FFA loses some members past high school due to being “burned by not getting state office” or “when they didn’t get what they wanted” so members become mad “they didn’t make the team” so they completely disengage from FFA.

Conclusions

Overall, the reasons Collegiate FFA members and current or former state officers continue with their FFA experience can be broken down into nine themes: (a) role of the advisor, (b) advertisement of Collegiate and Alumni FFA in high school, (c) personal relationships, (d) personal development, (e) priority of FFA in members’ lives, (f) ideas for improvement, and state officer trends which included (g) experiences in high school, (h) perceptions of FFA role after year of service as a state officer, and (i) why FFA loses members after high school.

Rossetti, McCaslin and Gliem (1996) found the advisor is a major influencer on students’ personal leadership development. Additionally, Smith, Garton, and Kitchel (2007) concluded agricultural teachers play a significant role for FFA enrollment and encouraging a positive FFA image. Similarly, Sirkin and McDermott (1995) stated when an organization has a positive image, students are provided with a more satisfying experience. In our study, we also found the advisor played a key role in why participants chose to continue with their FFA involvement in high school, college, and into alumni membership. Some participants stated their advisor was a positive influence on their involvement while other members noted their advisors did not push them enough. We recommend further research be conducted on the role of the advisor in influencing members’ decision to continue with the FFA during and after high school. We also recommend the National FFA Organization provide professional development resources on how advisors can be more effective in promoting a lifelong commitment to FFA as many participants were influenced by their advisors’ actions and opinions.

Many participants did not recall anyone discussing with them future opportunities to become involved with the FFA. Singer and Hughey (2002) purported alumni help to set guiding examples for current members on how to become effective and active alumni for their respected organizations. Similarly, Volkwein (2010) discovered alumni can provide organizational members with information about the organization that they would not normally have access to, how to become an alumnus, and how the organization can provide real world benefits. Both studies concluded alumni are often seen as major recruitment tools and can mentor members, further enhancing their development as a leader. In our study, we found many participants became aware of FFA opportunities past high school through peer-to-peer interactions with alumni of their FFA chapter talking about their collegiate involvement or were influenced by their posts on social media.

Participants expressed the need for more communication and advertising by the FFA in order to better promote collegiate and alumni opportunities. We recommend the National FFA Organization conduct an evaluation on the types of advertising that occurs on a local, state, and national level. Many participants could not recall deliberate efforts of advertising. Members may choose not to join collegiate and alumni FFA not because they do not want to, but because they are not aware that these types of membership exist, which coincides with Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (1991). Ajzen found the availability of resources and opportunities available to a person will help determine the likelihood of behavior achievement and in this case, the likelihood an FFA member will join Collegiate or Alumni FFA based on availability to knowledge and opportunities through advertising at the high school level. An evaluation of advertising efforts could help determine what is already being done locally and nationally, and the improvements needed to increase collegiate and alumni membership.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) purports intentions and influences are motivational factors that can influence how a person will behave and past behaviors can be possible indicators of future behaviors. Additionally, Terenzini and Reason's (2005) model of influence indicated pre-college experiences are the most powerful influence to how students make decision regarding their college experience. We found participants expressed many reasons for why they chose to continue with their FFA involvement on the collegiate level and some reasons stemmed from their high school experience. Participants enjoyed knowing Collegiate FFA was a safe place where they could share similar beliefs and interests related to agriculture. This is also in agreement with Allen, Ricketts, and Priest's (2007) study, which found students join FFA because FFA helps meet their need for a sense of belonging. Collegiate FFA should consider building off of this belief through activities such as debates, panel discussions, agriculture movie nights, and so forth. These or similar activities could further enhance the Collegiate FFA experience and bring the focus back to chapter development and increase individual member growth, as participants stated these are areas of weakness. Participants also stated they liked giving back to high school members because the FFA had a lasting impact on their life and wanted to return the favor. Participants stated they continued involvement because the FFA was what they had always done, and were not ready to give up on the organization that provided them with opportunities to grow and develop as a person and a leader. Replication of this study should be conducted to determine if these factors remain consistent and if there are any other factors or incentives to why FFA members continue their FFA involvement past high school. Additionally, we recommend the FFA consider using these factors when advertising to possibly increase membership.

Participants expressed they desired for Collegiate FFA to have an end goal for its members and they felt they were not as productive in the Collegiate FFA because there is no working end goal, such as building career skills and job opportunities. Participants desired for more career building opportunities at their university, but also in general, on a national level. This statement is concurrent with the National Research Council (2009), Montelongo (2002), Powell and Agnew (2007), and Schumacher and Sawm (1993), who all agree students benefit from organizations that allow them to apply knowledge to real world settings, especially career building skills. Powell and Agnew found student leaders in college are looking for more professional, career networking development opportunities, with Schumacher and Swan agreeing there is a demand additionally for leadership training. Participants in our study additionally expressed they do not believe there is consistency on what Collegiate FFA is across the nation. Sirkin and McDermott (1995) suggested when an organization has a positive image, students are provided with a greater sense of life satisfaction. In this study, we perceived participants did not have a great sense of satisfaction, because there is a lack of consistency and a positive image of Collegiate FFA due to Collegiate FFA not meeting some important components to participants' lives such as career building opportunities. In order to increase a positive image, nationwide consistency, and provide more career building opportunities, we recommend the National FFA Organization develop program guidelines that outline how Collegiate FFA chapters can foster premier leadership, personal growth

and career success. Replication of this study should also be conducted at other universities to see if other Collegiate FFA members desire career building opportunities and working end goals like they had in high school. The FFA should consider developing program guidelines that outlines how Collegiate FFA chapters can foster premier leadership, personal growth and career success to improve nationwide consistency.

When asked if participants would continue onto alumni membership, results varied. Most participants said yes if their home chapter already had an alumni chapter instated. Many participants said they would join, but there was currently no alumni chapter. We believe the lack of alumni chapters affects participants' long-term involvement goals. As previously stated, alumni are effective recruitment tools, can provide mentorship, and teach members how to become alumni (Singer & Hughey, 2002; Volkwein, 2010). We believe if there is no alumni chapter for members to join, there is no one to help provide an example for FFA members; thus, participants may lose motivation to join because they may not feel called to start up an alumni chapter on their own. An evaluation of FFA high school chapters to alumni chapter ratio is called for to determine how many FFA chapters also have alumni chapters. This evaluation could help determine what regions of the country have stronger alumni networks, and what areas need assistance. Successful alumni networks could help generate ideas and initiatives for other chapters to follow in order to start up and maintain successful alumni organizations. Moreover, we recommend information on best practices on starting and maintaining an alumni chapter be created to establish more chapters, awareness to the FFA alumni, and increase membership.

Ricketts (2005) expressed the more leadership opportunities students participate in the more members believe their skills such as leadership development, critical thinking and communication will improve. State officer participants personally chose to participate in more leadership opportunities than other participants and their experiences helped to shed light on different reasons why FFA members continue with their FFA involvement. All state officer participants expressed at some point in their FFA experience they lacked self-confidence and self-worth, which coincides with Allen, Ricketts and Priest (2007) who stated FFA members join for their need for a sense of belonging. Many stated they wanted to become a state officer in order to help bring confidence to members and give them the same sense of belonging prior state officers instilled in them. Weatherford (1984) stated students have a high need for self-worth and self-identity because they want to be better participants in society. Further research should be conducted to determine if overcoming self-confidence and worth by becoming a state officer is a trend with other state officers. To that end, half of the state officer participants had to overcome issues with chapter environment due to an advisor that hindered their self-confidence and worth. Tuner and Herren (1997) stated FFA members have a greater desire for achievement, affiliation and power within society, which for some state officers, this desire was fueled by the advisor. Future research should be conducted to determine the role of the advisor in the lives of state officers to determine if this is a trend among state officers.

State officers gave additional insight to why members discontinue their membership, especially in the areas of FFA burnout. Future research should be conducted solely with state officers on the reasons why FFA members discontinue their involvement as state officers are constantly around members and members feel comfortable sharing their experiences with role models. Finally, state officers noted their FFA involvement on the collegiate and alumni levels has decreased overtime. We believe further research should be conducted to identify the reasons why and if their decrease in involvement is due to FFA burnout.

In summary, to increase FFA membership after high school, we recommend the National FFA consider implementing professional development in order to help advisors promote FFA beyond high school to their students. Secondly, there should be an evaluation on current advertising efforts in high schools across the nation and increase local, state, and national advertising based on the results of this study and of the recommended evaluation. Thirdly, the FFA should consider developing program guidelines that outlines how Collegiate FFA chapters can foster premier

leadership, personal growth and career success to improve nationwide consistency. Additionally, local Collegiate FFA chapters should consider increasing members' sense of belonging by focusing on developing chapter members through events aimed at bringing members together – building upon the “FFA family”. Lastly, future research should establish best practices on establishing and leading a successful alumni chapter.

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