

FY07 Post-Secondary Mini-Research Project Proposal
Agricultural Education

**REVELANCE OF THE COMPREHENSIVE AGRICULTURAL
EDUCATION MODEL FOR NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN
URBAN COMMUNITIES**

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3. Narrative:

Since the Smith Hughes Act was established, the programs of high school agricultural education have included three integral components: 1) classroom and laboratory instruction; 2) student participation in the FFA; and 3) student involvement in agricultural experiences (Kapes, 1984). The integration of the three components into each high school agricultural education program is critical for the students to receive full educational benefit through the connection of each component building on the other (Talbert, Vaughn & Croom, 2005). This belief is further emphasized through the Public Law Act that requires each secondary agricultural education program in the state of Illinois offer all three components to be eligible for federal and State funding support (Illinois General Assembly, 2006).

Despite the requirement of the three components, every student enrolled in agricultural education does not seek membership in the National FFA Organization nor conduct a supervised agricultural experience program. During the 2005-2006 academic year, agricultural student numbers in Illinois increased to 26,329 students while the number students who were members of the FFA in the state was only 16,692 representing 63% of the students enrolled in Illinois agricultural education (Craft, 2006).

In agricultural education, the supervised experience provides the framework for students to improve their agricultural awareness and the skills and abilities required for a student's career (Talbert, Vaughn & Croom, 2005).

Although the supervised experience provides students with the opportunity to apply what is learned in the classroom, of the total high school agricultural education enrollment, only 36% of the students (equivalent to approximately 9,544 students) were involved with an integral supervised agricultural education program (Dittmar, 2006).

With the challenge of providing the opportunity for every agricultural education student to experience the three components, non-traditional programs and agricultural education programs serving non-traditional students experience a great gap between the number of students enrolled in an agricultural education class and the number enrolled in the FFA. Based on the 2005-2006 IAVAT agricultural education student/FFA enrollment report, several programs serving non-traditional students experience low FFA membership in comparison to the total student enrollment in agricultural education.

The number of urban agricultural education programs has increased during the past two decades. Today, 34% or approximately 168,316 FFA members live in urban and suburban areas and 11 of the 20 largest cities in the United States have FFA chapters including New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Houston, Phoenix, Miami, Minneapolis and Indianapolis (National FFA Organization, 2006b.). Within the state of Illinois, 60% of the agricultural education students live in a town or city, 27% live in a rural area while only 13%

grow up on a family farm (Dittmar, 2006). With the increasing number of potential and new urban agricultural programs, this study will examine teachers' knowledge, and understanding of the relevance of the comprehensive agricultural education model for the non-traditional students served by the local program. This study addresses the FY07 Mini-Research Project Topic #5, "Student Development."

4. Objectives:

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand urban and suburban agricultural education teachers' knowledge and beliefs regarding the relevance and applicability of the comprehensive agricultural education model for non-traditional students.

5. Procedures:

The following procedures were conducted to complete the project.

1. This two-part case study targeted teachers in urban and suburban horticultural/agricultural education high school programs as identified by IAVAT throughout Illinois. In cooperation with the FCAE Urban Field Advisor, we will identified teachers representing the 25 approved and non-approved programs in Cook, DuPage, Will, Lake and Kendall Counties.
2. For the first phase of the research project, the researchers organized a focus group interview protocol and field test with experts in agricultural

education. The questions were developed and tested among faculty within the University of Illinois for validity and clarity.

3. The researchers, in cooperation with the FCAE Urban Field Advisor, organized a 2.5 hour focus group that included 17 agricultural education teachers from the Chicago area high schools. The focus group was set up in order to inquire about the programs themselves and to discover any prevalent themes about the current state of these programs and also to see how the statewide model fit into these specific programs.
4. Each participant completed a two-page personal inventory which included demographics information, educational background, teacher certification status, agricultural education history, and classroom experiences. In addition, each participant completed a short questionnaire about his or her understanding of the three components of the agricultural education model.
5. The focus group, led by an independent moderator, utilized a list of questions developed in cooperation with the researcher, the FCAE Urban Field Advisor and the moderator. The interviews were video recorded and transcribed for accuracy of data.
6. Following the completion of the interview, the data was transcribed and open-coded for key ideas and themes. Categorical data was entered and analyzed using computerized data analysis software.

7. The second phase of the project included face-to-face interviews for more in-depth analysis of the subjects understanding and implementation of the three components of the agricultural education model.
8. Each interview conducted lasted between 30 to 45-minutes and the interview data was audio recorded as well as transcribed by the researcher. Data were then open-coded for key ideas and themes. Three categories were formed with several sub-categories.

Focus Group Results

On January 10, 2007, the researchers organized a focus group session at Moraine Valley Community College in Oak Lawn, IL for all approved urban and suburban agricultural education programs in the Chicagoland area. Seventeen high school agricultural education instructors participated in the focus group representing six agricultural education programs. Of the seventeen participants, 29% taught in a suburban community and the remaining 71% currently teach in an urban setting. Subjects also reported the type of community where they resided during grades 7-12. 11% of the participants resided in a town community. 23% resided in a suburban community and 66% resided in an urban community.

To gain a better understanding of each participant's experience with agricultural education prior to teaching, each participant was asked about their

previous experiences in agricultural education including community of residence, number of years of enrolled in high school agricultural education classes, FFA membership and supervised agricultural experiences (Table 1).

<i>Table 1: Number of Years of Involvement (n=17)</i> f/(%)	None	One Year	Two Years	Three Years	Four Years
High school agricultural education	11 (65%)	1 (6%)	2 (12%)		3 (18%)
FFA Membership	13 (77%)	1 (6%)			3 (18%)
Supervised Agricultural Experiences	14 (82%)	1 (6%)	1 (6%)		1 (6%)

Each subject reported the type of teacher certification he or she held to teach high agricultural education (Table 2).

<i>Table 2: Type of Teacher Certification (n=17)</i>	f	%
Standard/Master Certification (Trained in traditional Ag Ed teacher education program)	4	24%
Standard/Master Certification (Trained in traditional teacher education program in specialty other than Ag Ed)	4	24%
Provisional Certification (Teacher education candidate who held another state's valid comparable certificate)	1	6%
Alternative Route to Secondary Teacher Certification program	8	46%

The results of the personal demographics inventory was correlated with the participants' responses to their knowledge of the agricultural education model (Table 3).

<i>Table 3: Previous agricultural education experiences correlated to knowledge of the Comprehensive Agricultural Education Program</i>	Recall of three components of agricultural education model of total number for each classification	
	f	%
Standard/Master Certification (Trained in traditional Ag Ed teacher education program)	4	100
Standard/Master Certification (Trained in traditional teacher education program in specialty other than Ag Ed)	1	25
Provisional Certification (Teacher education candidate who held another state's valid comparable certificate)	0	0
Alternative Route to Secondary Teacher Certification program	1	13
Experience in high school agricultural education classes	4	67
Past experience in the National FFA Organization	4	100
Past experience with a supervised agricultural experience program	3	100

The subjects reported their involved in professional organizations and affiliations:

<i>Table 4: Professional Organizations/Affiliations (n=17)</i>	f	%
Dues-paying member of the Illinois Vocational Association of Agricultural Teachers (IAVAT)	15	88%
Served as a IAVAT section chairperson	0	0
Served as an elected IAVAT state position	0	0
Served on the Illinois FFA Board of Directors	0	0
Served on any Illinois committees for agricultural education	5	29%

The focus group session provided the forum for each teacher to share experiences, challenges and recommendations to improve agricultural education programs in urban and suburban communities. Several themes were presented through the questions asked of the participants. Although only six of the twenty

schools invited attended, the following results and comments represent the teachers present; they discussed six themes about the relevance of the comprehensive agricultural education model in urban and suburban communities.

Agricultural Education Knowledge

Seventy-six percent of the teachers did not mention supervised agricultural experiences (SAE) programs as one of the three components of agricultural education. However, 82% of the teachers identified the National FFA Organization as one of the components. The lack of understanding of the two components has caused five of the six programs represented to place a great emphasis on the classroom instruction components over the FFA and SAE. In the absence of the AgEd structure, four of the programs developed a structure specific to their own programs.

Re-Design of Agricultural Education

Thirteen of the seventeen teachers present were not able to recall or were not aware of the three components of agricultural education. After reviewing each of the three components with the entire group, five of the teachers discussed how they have each created their own three components that work best for the program. Particularly, each program has expanded the concept of supervised agricultural experiences (SAEs) beyond the typical definition used with the agricultural education community. SAEs have become hands-on experiences and mini-projects where students can guide their own learning and development process.

The teachers commented the lack of use of the record books for their versions of SAE tracking. The current electronic record books are complicated for teachers to understand and to teach their students to use.

Image of Agricultural Education

Students

During the focus group, four teachers addressed the difficulty of increasing involvement and interest in agricultural education due to the field itself. The majority of students that enrolled in agricultural education courses in the urban and suburban program – including the agricultural magnet school – experience difficulty of engaging students to the level where students take the courses seriously.

One instructor mentioned success through “sneaking” agriculture, FFA and SAE into classroom lessons. She places the focus on competitions and school meetings to attract students to her program. As a past FFA member, she knows how to teach introduce the “right” FFA programs and activities to “get them hooked”. Two teachers explained the key to working with non-traditional students in these settings is not through pushing FFA and SAE very strongly to the point of creating resentment from the students.

Administrators/Counselors/"Core" Teachers

With the exception of the urban agricultural magnet school, the remaining six instructors mentioned challenges to gain support from administrators for the program. One teacher openly discussed the lack of support she receives from the school administration. Due to lack of understanding, the administrator provides no support for FFA and SAE and refuses to pay for the time that is involved with such programs. In addition, the individual finds it difficult to pay the fees for the school club that is required within the individual's school district. These roadblocks have led to her not pursuing the FFA and SAE components of agricultural education for her program.

In addition to administrators, five teachers addressed the road blocks presented by high school counselors. Programs still encounter counselors that do not promote agricultural education to college bound students as well as strong academic students. The lack of knowledge about the agriculture field is difficult to overcome. Counselors continue to utilize agricultural education classes as a "dumping ground" for students with open spots in their schedules.

Agricultural education teachers are still not considered core teachers by their peers as well as the administrators.

Lack of Agricultural Education Preparation

Thirteen of the teachers present did not have the standard teacher certification background in agricultural education. Because the majority of the agricultural education instructors in the urban and suburban communities received Provisional or Alternative Routes to Secondary Teacher Certification,

these instructors were not exposed to agricultural education and its components as part of their education preparation process. With the lack of personal agricultural education experiences as well as Ag Ed preparation, the level of understanding of the FFA and SAE components is minimal.

Three teachers discussed their fear of trying to promote programs and activities of which they have little understanding or experience. The instructional booklets and seminars during statewide teacher in-services fail to provide enough direction and one-on-one tutorials for most teachers to implement the activities into their local programs. In addition, four teachers admitted to avoiding several of the SAE and FFA activities because of the extra time and work to effectively manage these programs.

Urban/Suburban Program Structure

Agricultural education in several of these schools lack the support of the community and administrators due to the number of programs offered at the high school level. Aggressive graduation requirements prohibit some students from enrolling in agricultural education beyond one semester or school year. The structure for agricultural education is designed for a student to build on his or her learning process over three to four years. However, it is not uncommon for students to enroll for a 9 week course to gain an introduction on a specific topic. One teacher cited this example as a rationale for the difficulty to build lasting rapport with students. Specifically, juniors and seniors that elect to enroll in agricultural education classes have difficulty competing for proficiency awards or certain leadership positions within the organization.

Lack of Personal Commitment and Motivation

The researchers met with instructors to gain a greater understanding of the personal commitment time dedicated to the FFA and SAE components within the local program. Eight teachers admitted the lack of desire to spend time during the weekends and evenings to adequately coach and work with students.

Face-to-Face Interviews Results

In an effort to gain additional insights, five additional schools were visited for face-to-face interviews to learn about the challenges faced in promoting the supervised agricultural experience program and the National FFA Organization to students at the local level. Three suburban schools and two urban programs were visited for the following data that was collected.

Absence of Personal Agricultural Education Experience

Of the teachers interviewed, a common theme we observed is the cross connection between teachers that were enrolled in agricultural education in high school and their drive to promote the comprehensive model. Of the six teachers interviewed with no previous agricultural experience, each instructor commented on the difficulty to understand the structure of the organization and feeling overwhelmed by the number of activities and time required.

The teachers with past high school agricultural education experience shared a greater motivation for promoting the SAE and FFA components than the instructors with no previous experience. One of the potential factors leading to lack of involvement of the urban and suburban programs is the lack of personal

connection to the benefits and experiences provided through membership in the FFA and involvement in SAE projects.

Supervised Agricultural Experiences Challenges

The greatest challenge of the urban and suburban programs interviewed is the supervised agricultural experience component. The percentage of students actively involved in SAE ranged from 1-5% with the exception of two programs that require freshmen student to keep records. Each teacher agreed with the importance of students learning the value of gaining real-world experiences and developing record keeping skills.

However, in spite of each instructor's understanding of the importance, all twelve teachers mentioned concerns about the current relevance of SAEs for the students served by each program. Rationales for lack of relevance ranged from students not seeing a future in the field to timing issues for teachers to promote and utilize SAEs in the classroom. As one instructor commented, "Time is a problem. I'm always running around. By the end of the day, I'm wiped."

However, the most common response among all teachers is the feeling that SAEs are not effective in its current form due to the lack of opportunities for additional non-traditional projects. Some of the urban and suburban teachers struggle with identifying SAE projects for their students. "It is hard to get students to do a traditional SAE. There are almost no animal ones available. I don't have a model to follow to use non-traditional SAEs."

The teachers interviewed identified SAE as the component that "does not work well" in urban and non-traditional communities. "I believe in traditional,

smaller communities, yes, SAEs are important. In [a non-traditional town], no. It does not work as well for kids whom just don't see the importance."

As a result of the challenges, the majority of the instructors admitted to minimally promoting SAEs to their students – particularly beyond their students' freshmen year. The rationales of time, lack of understanding of the record books as well as lack of student interest lead to SAES not being promoted.

Overall, the urban and suburban instructors believe that non-traditional students are at a great disadvantage for state and national competitions in comparison to the traditional, farm related SAEs projects. "I believe the current SAE programs do not meet the need. It is difficult for non-traditional students to compete with traditional students who have larger enterprises. Once acre of asparagus is not a specialty crop where as an acre of sweet corn is considered a specialty crop." The limited number of non-traditional SAE areas potentially discourages non-traditional students from pursuing SAE projects. "Our students can't really relate to what they see at state convention. The focus seems to be on the traditional SAEs. We only get in with something strange, like science-based SAEs or aquaculture."

FFA Challenges

Each instructor reported that 35% or less of the FFA members in their chapter is actively involved. Among the programs interviewed, the average level of participation per chapter is approximately 8%. The instructors agreed that the National FFA Organization provide great opportunities for students – "especially

for students not exposed to the Ag community.” All of the instructors recognized the value of the leadership and communication skills students can gain through active involvement in the FFA.

The FFA program proved to have greater relevance for the urban and suburban programs than the SAE component. “The FFA gives (students) the transferable skills and soft skills needed in industry.” In spite of the relevance, teachers still mentioned difficulty in increasing student involvement as well as time obligations as rationales for lack of involvement in the FFA program.

Seven instructors interviewed felt that the current state association environment is a major deterrence for urban and suburban students to seek involvement in the FFA. “Our students have a hard time fitting in at State FFA Convention.” “The state is not as diverse and accepting of diversity as it is on the National level. The state association is still traditionally non-urban with that cookie-cutter mode of what officers and the organization should look like.”

Gender Issues

According to the 2006-2007 Illinois Association Vocational Agriculture Teachers Membership Directory, 78% of the current agricultural teachers in the urban and suburban areas of Chicago are women. Two teachers addressed during face-to-face interviews the difficulty of managing an agricultural education program in the state of Illinois. Two major issues cited acceptance and value among peers and balance of home life with the great demands of the Ag teacher role.

The number of women state leaders has been minimal in the IAVAT and FFA leadership positions. Feelings of inequality and value have led some teachers not to seek leadership roles within the state. “I believe [the IAVAT] does not pertain to me anymore” “I’m tired of playing the game with the good ole’ boys”. In addition, the demands of an agricultural education instructor require evenings, and many women have family responsibilities that conflict with this. “It’s also difficult to leave home for two weeks with the State FFA Convention and IAVAT one after another. It is hard for wives that have families at home.” The demands of the job have also led to some teachers reducing their involvement in teacher development opportunities. “I used to go to IAVAT Conference. They used to comment all the time how teachers spend a lot of time away from home and family. It’s not a good balance for family and work.”

Conclusions, Recommendations and Implications

All of the programs represented during the focus groups and contacted via face-to-face interviews reported the inability to effectively implement the comprehensive agricultural education model into their programs. As a whole, each teacher has implemented some portions of the three components to work best for the program despite the challenges and limitations of the program. The following are recommendations based on insights shared during the focus group and interviews:

Teacher Training/In-service

During the focus group and face to face interviews, seven teachers requested additional training and assistance to gain knowledge about the FFA structure and programs as well as tips to implement SAE programs effectively. Due to the large number of teachers who did not enter an agricultural education teacher certification program, the teachers requested special courses to provide step-by-step examples and resources to instructors lacking the personal experience. Two teachers mentioned programming that the University of Illinois provided in the past for urban teachers to work towards Masters' credit in addition to seminars hosted on campus.

Partner Development Workshops

Four teachers suggested that the state agricultural education partners and universities provides courses and/or certifications for “core” teachers, administrators and counselors pertaining to the structure and opportunities available through agricultural education and the agricultural industry leading to employment opportunities. The lack of knowledge of these key partners contributes to the misinformation and deterrence by school counselors to encourage students to enroll in agricultural education courses.

Further research and organized conversations can provide greater insights to state agricultural leaders to devise programming and polices to help the urban and suburban programs better connect and bridge the gap that currently exists. As of current, no urban or suburban teacher serves on the board of either the Illinois Association Vocational Agriculture Teachers or the Illinois FFA Association. These programs must have a voice and vote at the

table to aid in policies and programming that benefits the non-traditional programs as well as rural communities throughout the state. Lack of representation in the decision making process will continue to foster feelings of alienation and inferiority among other programs throughout the state.

National and state leaders in agricultural education must address the relevance of the comprehensive model for all local programs – including non-traditional and urban/suburban programs. The majority of teachers interviewed representing twelve agricultural education programs concluded that the comprehensive model in its current form does not meet the needs of their programs. With a greater portion of the country's agricultural education students enrolling in urban areas, the relevance of the comprehensive model will become an even greater issue and challenge for programs throughout the state.

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