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Growing Leaders: Empowering Youth Through Enhanced FFA Programs

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Abstract

The focus of this Capstone Project is on the benefits of an FFA program and how it could be improved. This is an important issue for current and future FFA students because the program is a basis for future leaders in the industry. An argument is made that students who join their high school FFA program will gain tools and experiences they will use throughout the rest of their lives. The primary stakeholder perspectives chosen were previous and current FFA students because they have not only been through the program but are reaping its benefits in their current lives. Three themes emerged from an analysis of the data and were explored as ways to address the issue presented. Based on an analysis of the interviews and the relevant research literature, the researcher used what they learned to formulate an action that responded in a way that inspires, informs, or involves a particular audience.

How FFA Has Shaped My Life

When I started high school, I had no idea what I was doing. I was just flying by the seat of my pants and taking the classes I needed to graduate in 4 years while also playing volleyball for the high school team. My parents were on me about signing up for clubs and joining different organizations through the school but as a freshman, it was extremely overwhelming. I had so many family members and friends suggesting that I join the FFA (Future Farmers of America) program, but the only thing I had heard about the program was that people only take it for the easy A in the classes. So, like any other freshman, I joined because I figured it would be easy. What I didn't realize were the amazing opportunities and chances that were going to come my way. I signed up for the Intro to Ag class and found myself enjoying every single bit of it from learning about the ag industry, raising my own chicken, and how to become a better public speaker. After being in this class for only 2 months, I instantly began getting more involved with the program.

Within the FFA program, there are positions called Chapter Officers that are made up of students that help run the chapter. The first thing I got involved with was becoming a green hand officer, which is an opportunity for freshmen. I applied, went through an interview, and got the position of treasurer. It challenged me on how to adapt to a leadership role. I learned how to effectively work with my team to create fun and engaging activities for our chapter. I encouraged some members to join me in citrus judging and learned about how to pick the best citrus and also competed with my team in opening and closing which gave me more confidence in public speaking.

Towards the end of my freshman year, I talked with some other chapter members who show animals and decided to try my hand at raising a pig. It was the best decision I had ever

made. This animal project was challenging yet rewarding. The daily tasks that you have to maintain in raising a farm animal to show were overwhelming. In the end, though, it was so rewarding. It taught me to be dedicated, responsible, and patient. After my first year of showing, I loved it so much that I decided to show for the next two years also.

My sophomore year was very special for me because FFA gave me the opportunity to raise a Guide Dog for the Blind puppy. Previously working with my pig prepared me for the responsibility I needed to work with this puppy, or so I thought. Not only was there daily caretaking of him but also he needed to be with me every minute of every day so I could train him to know and do the things he needed to be the eyes for somebody else. Eventually, the hope is for a vision-impaired individual to count on him to keep them safe. That was a lot of pressure and dedication.

When I became a junior, I decided to take a chance and apply to be a chapter officer. This was a big deal because when you are a chapter officer, you are actually in charge of the whole chapter and planning the big activities, going to competitions with your team, and even running monthly meetings. I applied and went through the interview, but to become a chapter officer you had to give a speech in front of the whole chapter as to why you want to be an officer and then they vote who they feel would be the best fit. This was very nerve-racking but I got through it and made the team as a Treasurer. Senior year I applied again and went through the same process and this time made it on the team as Vice President. Becoming a part of the chapter officer team not only taught me to be responsible and dedicated but it also taught me to be competitive when it comes to achieving goals. Although I achieved my own goal of making the officer team, there were still goals for the chapter that needed to be achieved, and being a part of this team gave me the will and the drive to help make those goals a reality.

The FFA program has given me so many wonderful opportunities and experiences that I am so thankful for. They have taught me so many different lessons that I will carry on for the rest of my life. One of the biggest things FFA has given me is confidence. I feel much more confident when I am talking to people or when I stand up and speak in front of a crowd. It has also taught me how to effectively go through an interview and the do's and don'ts of an interview process. I will forever be thankful for everything that the FFA program has taught me and given me.

Literature Synthesis

Being involved in an FFA program, or Future Farmers of America offers different opportunities and activities to students who are interested in the agricultural industry and related fields. Although FFA is related to agriculture, it goes far beyond that in many other ways. This diverse organization offers students the opportunity for personal growth, leadership development, and overall career success. With an emphasis on leadership development, it allows students to fine-tune their talents and strive to reach their maximum potential. Engaging in FFA provides its members with the tools they need to thrive and succeed in their future careers. Being a part of this program also allows students a safe place to build their networking, mentorship, and career advancement.

Why is it an Issue/Opportunity?

FFA is a student-run organization and being a part of this program gives those students an opportunity to grow in so many different ways. Not only can students gain their skills and knowledge within the agricultural industry, but they can also gain many other skills they will carry with them throughout the rest of their lives by making the world around them a better place. The majority of students join FFA because of the classes that are offered but are often unaware of the activities that they can participate in to reap the benefits in the long run. Some of the activities to participate in through FFA are officer positions, judging teams, raising and showing livestock for the county fair, attending conferences and conventions, and so much more. By doing these activities through school and the community, students gain skills such as leadership, dedication, responsibility, determination, and patience, “Previous research highlighted some benefits obtained by being involved in the FFA. Some of those benefits are the opportunity to reach personal goals, engage in meaningful activities, as well as increase

self-esteem, cognitive needs, and self-actualization.” (Rose et al. 2016) When students gain these various skills, they will continue to use them throughout their entire lives. They will find them helpful not only in their future career but just in going through life itself.

What Has and/or Should Be Done?

Although being involved in an FFA program offers many benefits to its members, not every program is perfect. There is always room for improvement in anything. Many students do not know about FFA or what the program is about. Students go through high school without joining a club or organization and don't gain the same benefits that those do by being a part of an FFA program. Reaching out or increasing awareness of the FFA program to other students, will open their eyes about what they can do or gain from the program, “Additionally, building support for the program and recruiting and motivating students were also deemed to be very important...” (Mundt and Connors 1999) Even the students that are already enrolled and involved in the program do not fully understand the benefits they can gain by participating in the activities provided. FFA advisors and students should reach out to those students and make them aware of what they could do and how it could benefit them in their future careers.

Conclusion

Becoming involved in an FFA program will provide students with so many benefits not only in the agricultural industry but outside of it as well. It will equip you with the essential skills and knowledge you will need to carry throughout your life. Even if you decide to pursue a career outside of agriculture, these skills will still lead you to career success. With its emphasis on education, personal growth, and career success, FFA offers a unique chance to contribute to the future of agriculture while experiencing personal and professional growth.

Method

For this Capstone Project, the researcher will investigate how students view the FFA program, the benefits of the program, and what they think could be done to improve it. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, the researcher will use what they have learned to formulate an action that responds to the improvement of the program in a way that inspires, informs, or involves a particular audience.

Context

The location of the school my topic will be revolved around is a small farming community within the largest agricultural area in my state. The location that is relevant is the Wildcat High School ag department where my interviews will take place. These interviews will take place in the Floral and the Intro to Ag classroom. Both of these classrooms are large with many countertop tables. The floral classroom has a wall full of tools to provide the students with the necessary equipment to make their arrangements. The Intro to Ag classroom is a freshman course so there are a lot of posters and opportunities for things going on in the department pasted all over the walls.

Participants and Participant Selection

The participants who took part in my study consisted of a mixture of five previous and current FFA members. The interviewees consisted of 40% male and 60% female with an M age of 20. All of the participants were Caucasian and grew up in the same community that the high school is located in.

Jack Hill. A white male who was president of his FFA chapter. He is currently a manager and winemaker at a winery in his state.

Brittany Jones. A white female and current freshman student. She is on the Greenhand officer team and shows a pig at the county fair.

Rachel Lovelock. A white female and current freshman student. She is on the Best Informed Greenhand team and shows a lamb at the county fair.

Ron Burgundy. A white male who was vice president of his FFA chapter. He is currently finishing his four-year degree to go into politics.

Laney Brown. A white female who raised a guide dog. She is currently working as a pharmaceutical technician.

Researcher

This opportunity is important to me because I want these students to get the same benefits out of being involved in an FFA program as I did. To have the tools and experiences to shape and guide them through life's challenges and experiences. I am qualified to speak on the FFA program because I was heavily involved throughout all 4 years of my high school career. I participated in the Guide dog program, was Vice President and Treasurer of my chapter, raised and showed animals, designed floral arrangements, prepared speeches, attended leadership conferences, and competed in competitions of all kinds. I believe that no matter what background you come from there is something for everybody in this program.

Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions

1. What do you know about your FFA program? How would you describe the benefits of FFA? What do you see as the challenges facing FFA programs?
2. What is currently being done to improve participation in the program or improve the

opportunities offered by the program - by whom - and what are the strengths and weaknesses of these efforts?

3. What do you think should be done to improve participation in the program or improve the opportunities offered by the program?

4. What do you think are the challenges or barriers to improving participation or the activities or opportunities offered by the program?

5. Is there anything else that you would like to say about FFA, increasing participation, or improving the opportunities and activities offered by the program?

Procedure¹

Participants were interviewed. All interviews were done individually. When it was not possible to interview participants in person, they were invited to complete a phone interview or paper and pencil survey of the same questions. Face-to-Face interviews took less than one hour, be audio-recorded (with participant consent), and took place in the Ag building at Wildcat High School. A semi-structured interview format was used for face-to-face interviews, to allow for follow-up questions to unclear, interesting, or unexpected responses. All interviews/surveys were scheduled at the convenience of the interviewee and took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

¹ <http://my.ilstu.edu/~jhkahn/>

Results

For this Capstone Project, previous and current FFA students were interviewed to see what they think could be done to improve the FFA program. This is important because the program is a basis for future leaders in the industry. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1). Evidence-based decision-making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: cost; reach; and time required. These are important elements in a successful FFA program because without them it would fail. Any school program costs money. So reaching out by fundraisers and grants to help provide students with extra costs for program needs, and the school with proper equipment is time-consuming, but a necessity to help all students achieve success. Most importantly you need students to shape and grow our ever-evolving future. Without successful students, we wouldn't have future business owners, leaders, and teachers to continue to shape our future youth. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1

Evaluation of Action Options

	Cost	Reach	Time Required
Student Recruitment: Without students, you won't have a program.	low	high	high
Fundraising options: Provides more money to the program to allow students more opportunities by cutting the cost.	medium	high	high
More/Better Equipment: Allows students more hands-on opportunities for learning and growth.	high	medium	low

Student Recruitment

Student recruitment is huge when it comes to an FFA program. You need students in order to run this program because the National FFA Organization is a student ran program with only guidance from the advisors. When I interviewed my participants, many of them said that they would like to see more students join the program to gain the same benefits as they did. The cost of this action option would be low because you would only have to pay for the transportation costs to and from the school or event you are presenting at. Reach was high because going out and speaking to other students about FFA, is going to allow many students to gain more knowledge about the program in hopes of bringing them in. The time required is also high because you need to take the time to not only prepare what you are going to do or say to the students but also take the time out of your day and the student's day to go and speak with them.

Fundraising

Fundraising is another important option to run an FFA program. Everything we do costs money nys so without any funding, students will not be able to participate in many activities. After listening to my interviewees, many students do not become as involved with FFA as they would like due to financial purposes. Fundraising will allow the program to help those students out with supplies or materials to help them gain the same experience as others. The cost for fundraising is medium because you need to purchase supplies to resell to make more money for the program. The reach is high because many people love donating to programs like these so the more fundraising you do, the more funding you will get to help out the students. The time required is also high because you need to take the time to organize it, set it up, put it together, and advertise your fundraiser to gain people's awareness about it.

More/Better Equipment

Having more or updated equipment was the last important option I came up with from my interviews. The students I interviewed stated that they would prefer more equipment in the classroom or on the farm so that way every student can be doing something rather than having students standing around or having to take turns. Having more or better, updated equipment will allow students to gain hands-on knowledge and experiences in the agricultural industry while also making the class more enjoyable. The cost of more equipment is high because buying things in bulk for a classroom, especially tools or things for around the school farm can be pretty expensive. The reach would be medium because it is allowing more students to work hands-on and learn how to use the tools. The time required is low because when it comes to purchasing these items and having them delivered, you really do not do much. It is all done online and does not take much time to order them.

Conclusion

Recommendation. All three options are great and beneficial when it comes to running an FFA program but the most important one is student recruitment. FFA is a student ran organization so without having students coming in, you will not have a successful program. Students will then not gain those opportunities and skills mentioned earlier that they will carry with them throughout their careers and lives. So few people know what this organization can provide and current members need to show how they have become successful through being active and participating in the program's opportunities.

Concessions. Fundraising and gaining more or better equipment for students to use are also very critical to run an FFA program. As we know, everything costs money so fundraising will help cut the costs of activities and opportunities, especially for those that aren't as financially stable as others. Having more or better equipment is also essential for the growth of

the students. By providing more tools or classroom supplies, students can work hands-on on a project or activity and learn different skills that could lead them to a career.

Limitations. A limitation that comes with my recommendation is access to students. With student recruitment, you need to go out and speak to students in an elementary school or middle school setting. Having to schedule time with the current FFA students and the schools or administrators can be challenging. Sometimes you have conflicting schedules or maybe the school administrators simply do not want the FFA students to come speak to the students at that school. These are some limitations that could hinder student recruitment immensely. Without going out and talking to students and educating them about the FFA program, you will not have as many students joining the program when they get into high school.

Potential negative outcomes. A negative outcome that could follow my recommendation is that students simply do not like the program. Students may join because they heard all of these wonderful things about it, but once they join, they may realize that they hate it. Some people are not hands-on learners and that is what makes up the majority of an FFA program is hands-on activities. If you are not a hands-on learner, you may not succeed as well as others that are in the program. Also, FFA forces you out of your shell and out of your comfort zone but some students may find that challenging. This could also be a factor that drives students away from this program.

Conclusion. Although all three options provided are very beneficial for an FFA program, the most important one is student recruitment. You need students to run this program so it is very important to recruit students who are about to begin high school. The limitation of arranging a time to speak with students and get around to all the elementary or middle schools in the area can

be tough. Being a part of an FFA program is not for everybody but it is beneficial to at least give it a try and see how you like it and the benefits that come with it.

Action Documentation and Critical Reflection

For this capstone project, I focused more on an opportunity rather than an issue while also touching on how it could be improved. This project was about the benefits of an FFA program and what students will get out of it and how they will carry these skills with them throughout the rest of their lives. Whether it is in their future career or through everyday life, these skills will be helpful and necessary for both. Not every program is perfect so I also looked at the ways that the program could be improved or made better. I interviewed five different students who have either been through the program already or are currently involved in the program right now. The three action options that emerged from the interviews were more student recruitment, more fundraising options, and better or more equipment in the classroom or on the school farm. The one that I focused on the most was student recruitment because FFA is a student-run program so without recruiting and gaining any students, you won't have a program or as well of a program. I created a pamphlet that has more information about FFA and what it is. It also shows the activities and opportunities students can participate in while also highlighting how it can benefit students.



Critical Reflection (Individual)

While participating in this project, I not only learned a lot about myself but also about teaching and learning and working towards a change. Something I learned about myself was how I didn't realize how many things I gained from FFA until I participated in this project. All of the benefits I talked about gaining throughout my project really shined when it came down to interviewing my participants, working on this project, and presenting in front of everybody at the capstone festival. When it came to learning about teaching and learning, I learned that teaching is much more challenging than I thought. It is challenging to integrate everything to create successful students and adjust to the students who learn differently. Something I learned about

learning is that no matter how old you get or how smart you are, there is always something else to be learned. Lastly, I learned that working toward change starts with our youth. If we do not provide experiences and opportunities for our youth in our ever-evolving world, you will never see a change.

Synthesis and Integration (Individual)

The Liberal Studies MLOs, required coursework, and this action research project have impacted my professional development in a couple of ways. The MLOs have taught me different skills and different ways to incorporate various things such as technology and other students' experiences into my teaching. The required coursework that I took has really benefited me when it comes to becoming a teacher. Some of them taught me different ways to incorporate cultural differences as well as different strategies to work with students who come from different cultural backgrounds. Other classes have taught me how to teach my future students different subjects such as math lessons or incorporating art into my lessons. When it came to this action research project, it taught me that trying to integrate everything can be a challenge but with practice and patience, it will get done.

In order to become the professional I envision being, there are some steps that I need to take in order for things to work out. For starters, I need to apply to a credential program and once I get in I need to take the required courses to obtain my multiple-subject teaching credential. Once I get my credential, I then need to start applying for teaching positions in hopes of getting one near my home. When I finally become the teacher I have dreamed of becoming, I will use all of the skills I have learned through my required coursework, liberal studies MLOs, and this action research project to provide my students with the best possible learning experience.

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