

# NATIONAL FFA CAREER DEVELOPMENT EVENTS: AN INTROSPECTIVE INQUIRY

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this study is to determine why students participate in national career development events and to examine factors related to their participation. A survey was completed by 2145 FFA members and by 206 FFA advisor/coaches in 2003. FFA members who participate in national career development events are generally pleased with the conduct of the events and find them valuable to their education. FFA members are trained for national FFA career development events primarily by their agriculture teacher. This training generally lasts between one and five hours per week and will most likely occur after normal school hours. Teachers and students in this study disagree as to the reason why members participate in national career development events. Teachers believe that the most important reason for participation is competition, but students indicate that their most important reason for participation is that the event relates to their career choice.*

## Introduction

The FFA Organization provides leadership and personal development opportunities for students enrolled in agricultural education. In agricultural education, students learn skills related to specific agricultural occupations and, in a broader sense, develop their agricultural literacy through exposure to the general concepts of the food, fiber, and natural resources industry. In agricultural education, the finished product is a student's knowledge of the agriculture industry. The FFA proposes to add value to this product by improving a student's leadership ability, personal communication skills and personal work habits. For the students who wish to pursue agricultural careers, the personal and professional development provided by the FFA is intended to assist them once they enter the workforce. For the student who is enrolled in agricultural education primarily for the purpose of providing agricultural literacy, the FFA provides the opportunity to experience all aspects of agriculture - from seed to market to boardroom.

In 2004, the National FFA Organization completed a five-year review process of the FFA career development events and found that a mechanism was needed to align CDE's with projected careers as they become available in the food, fiber and natural resources industry. Furthermore, the FFA needed to find ways to involve more middle grade students in career development events. The report also indicated a need to continue efforts to assist new teachers in improving overall participation in CDE's and to document the relationship between curriculum and career development events. The report further indicated a need to continue efforts to improve participation in CDE's by a diverse population of students enrolled in agricultural education (National FFA Organization, 2004).

This research project sought to examine one segment of the total FFA program – career development events [CDE's]. According to the National FFA Organization (2000), one of the

most highly esteemed benefits of FFA membership is the connection established between the student and the agriculture industry. The career development events program is intended to provide students with the opportunity to practice skills learned in the classroom and on the job, but does it effectively meet both the FFA program's goals and the goals of individual FFA members? Are career development events meeting the career needs of FFA members?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The purpose of this study is to determine why students participate in national career development events and to examine factors related to their participation in national career development events. In order to assess the effectiveness of career development events, the researchers conducted an evaluation study, and the theoretical base for it is derived from the CIPP model developed by Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (1985). The goal of the CIPP evaluation model is not to prove, but rather to improve programs (Stufflebeam, 2001). To accomplish program improvement, this model utilizes four core components, or types of evaluations – context evaluation, input evaluation, process evaluation, and product evaluation. The context evaluation component determines the needs of a specific program and helps to define the program's objectives. The input evaluation phase identifies resources needed by the program. The process evaluation answers the question, "How well has the program been implemented?" The final evaluation phase examines the outcomes of the program to determine if the objectives have been met (Stufflebeam, 2003). The CIPP model is useful because it is relatively easy to organize the evaluation process around the four components (Worthen, Sanders, Fitzpatrick, 1997). This comprehensive model allows the context, input and process evaluations to take place while simultaneously waiting for the product evaluation (Payne, 1994). Because of the impact this model has on program administration, it is important to have both internal and external evaluators. This helps control bias in interpreting results (Stufflebeam, 2001).

To gather contextual data, the National FFA Organization has established a career development events advisory board to annually review and make recommendations regarding changes in the structure and operation of career development events. Every five years, the National FFA Organization completes a systematic and comprehensive review process of career development events to determine if they are congruent with the FFA mission, and that they are still relevant to technological advancements in the food, fiber, and natural resources industry (National FFA Organization, 2004). The National FFA Organization also gathers demographic data from participants during the career development events. This includes data about FFA members, coaches, and the schools, FFA chapters and communities where the school resides.

To gather input and process data, the National FFA Organization collects opinion data from member participants and their coaches during the career development events. Some of the data that might be collected from these opinion surveys includes information about the school curriculum in agricultural education, instructional materials used to prepare teams, and funding for CDE team preparation and travel to the national event. Informal observations by CDE event staff and national FFA staff are also valuable sources of data.

For many teachers, even beginning teachers, interacting with students through participation in FFA activities is an enjoyable part of the job of teaching (Talbert, Camp, and

Heath-Camp, 1994). Although managing the FFA program is a demanding task (Mundt & Conners, 1999), one of the effective teaching responsibilities identified by Roberts and Dyer (2002) is to prepare students for participation in career development events.

Overall, FFA members believe that the FFA provides valuable assistance in helping students choose a career and that FFA programming also helps them reach certain education goals as well (Croom & Flowers, 2001). Those students who are involved in FFA activities and who choose to attend college are significantly more likely to earn a baccalaureate degree (Ball and Garton, 2002). Students who participate in a number of FFA activities including career development events complete their agricultural education program and tend to enter an agricultural occupation (Fraze & Briers, 1986; Bowen & Doerfort, 1989). However, Scanlon, Yoder, Hoover, and Johnson (1989) report that the essential practices perceived to be most effective by teachers in recruiting and retaining FFA members were participation in career development events, FFA activities, and awards programs. Rossetti, McCaslin, and Gliem (1996) found that FFA members reported that the reason why they chose to be a member was based on the organization's ability to help them achieve future career goals. The study further reports that a student's interest in FFA activities and programs and the enjoyment derived from them, and leadership skill development were major reasons for being a member. The National FFA Organization should develop new career development events based upon emerging student interests and agricultural technologies. These recognition programs should be periodically reviewed to determine their effectiveness in motivating students (Shinn & Vaughn, 1993).

### **Purpose And Objectives**

The purpose of this study is to determine what motivates students to participate in national career development events and to examine factors related to their participation in career development events. The specific research questions addressed by this study are:

1. What motivates students to participate in national career development events?
2. What are the perceptions of students regarding the conduct of the national career development events?
3. How are students prepared to participate in the national career development events?
4. Is there a difference between advisors' and students' perceptions of participation and preparation in career development events?

### **Procedures**

The population for this study was the total number of registered participants in the career development events held at the 2003 National FFA Convention in Louisville, Kentucky. This population included both the FFA member participants and their coaches, and was selected because these individuals had advanced to the highest level of participation in this FFA program. The student survey was completed by 2145 FFA members and the teacher survey was completed by 206 adults who serve as the coach for a particular student or team in a career development event. Respondents in the student survey were asked to complete 31 items related to the educational value of the national career development events in which they participated, the quality of the event itself, and methods of recognition. The Likert-based items on the survey

instrument ranged from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree, and from 1 = least important to 5 = most important. Respondents in the teacher survey were asked to complete 24 items related to the educational value of the national career development events in which they participated, the relationship to curriculum, types of instruction materials and training methods. Likert-based items on the instrument ranged from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree, and from 1 = least important to 5 = most important. The instrument was developed by a team of professional educators who work closely with national FFA career development events. The instrument's validity was established by teacher educators with experience in FFA programs. A reliability analysis yielded Kuder-Richardson 20 coefficient scores of .79 for the student survey and .70 for the teacher survey. The instrument was administered to participants upon completion of their respective career development event.

### **Findings**

The 2145 student respondents were almost equally divided according to gender, although the females held a slight majority at 48.5% when compared to the male respondents (48.4%). The majority of respondents were Caucasian (92.2%) with the second largest ethnic population in the study being Native Americans (1.6%). There were no African American respondents in the survey. Most of the students were juniors and seniors in high school (61.8%), and the majority of respondents had been FFA members for three or more years (76.5%). The majority were from a rural farm community (63.4%). Almost half of the respondents reported that the chapter FFA degree was the highest degree they held at the time of the national career development events, and 12.9% reported that they had earned no degree at all. Seventy-five percent of respondents reported that the 2003 national FFA career development event in which they were participating was their first one. Twenty-four percent of respondents had participated in two or more national career development events.

Participants were asked to rate five items based upon the impact these items had on their decision to participate in the national career development event. Participants ranked competition as having the least impact on their decision to participate in a national career development event. The item that most influenced the respondents' decision to participate was that the national career development event related to their career choice (see Table 1). An independent samples t-test found that female students ranked career choice significantly higher than male students. Male students rated the opportunity to earn scholarships and to develop leadership skills significantly higher than female students.

Respondents reported that participation in the national career development event evaluated their current knowledge of the agriculture subject specific to the event ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ), and that classroom instruction was useful preparation for the event ( $M = 3.84$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ). Respondents agreed that participation better prepared them for future employment opportunities ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ), and exposed them to new career areas associated with the career development event ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ). To a lesser extent, respondents agreed that participation was valuable to their career preparation ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) and that it related to their supervised agricultural experience ( $M = 3.21$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) (see Table 2).

Table 1

*Participant responses to items regarding their decision to participate in a national career development event.*

Item	Male Students (N = 1039)		Female Students (N = 1041)		<i>t-value</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Relates To Career Choice	3.04	1.39	2.87	1.45	2.81*
Leadership Development	3.21	1.21	3.71	1.18	-9.46*
Scholarship Awards	3.53	1.31	3.75	1.19	-3.95*
Travel/Fun	3.80	1.23	3.72	1.21	.142
Competition	3.92	1.09	3.98	1.06	-1.24

*Note.* 1 = Most Important, 5 = Least Important.

\* $p < .01$ .

Table 2

*Mean scores of respondents regarding the educational value of the career development event.*

Item (N = 2145)	Mean	SD
This specific event evaluated my current knowledge and ability.	4.13	0.91
The instruction I received during my agriculture classes prepared me to participate in this event.	3.84	1.09
By participating in this event, I am better prepared to compete for future employment opportunities.	3.81	1.03
My participation in this event exposed me to new career areas.	3.60	1.10
Participation in the event was a value to my career preparation.	3.47	1.18
The event was related to my supervised agricultural experience.	3.21	1.34

*Note.* 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Respondents agreed that the instructions they received regarding the computerized scoring process ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) as well as overall event procedures were clearly explained ( $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ). Rules were enforced fairly ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ) and distractions were limited ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ). The facilities were adequate for the event ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ), and materials used by the respondents allowed them to perform at their best performance level ( $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) and they were able to complete the event activities in a timely manner ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ). Overall, respondents reported that both they ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) and their team members ( $M = 3.84$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) were prepared to participate in the event (see Table 3).

Seven items on the survey instrument asked respondents to rate the common methods of recognition for participation in career development events (see Table 4). Respondents rated scholarships ( $M = 4.52$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ) as the most important method of recognition among all other items. Respondents also rated tangible representations of their achievement in the form of medals, plaques, and trophies ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ). Respondents also rated publicity in news media ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ), award functions ( $M = 3.32$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ), and internships ( $M = 3.29$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ) as important. Respondents were neutral towards certificates as a form of recognition ( $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) and main stage recognition ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ).

Table 3

*Mean scores of respondents regarding the quality of the national career development event.*

Item (N =2145)	Mean	SD
I understood the instructions given for completing the computer score sheets.	4.27	0.91
Event committee enforced the rules for this event in a fair manner.	4.18	0.99
The degree of difficulty was appropriate for this level of competition.	4.11	0.94
Event procedures were explained clearly by event officials.	4.03	1.02
Facilities used for the event were adequate.	3.96	0.98
I was prepared to participate in this event.	3.92	1.03
I had enough time to complete the event activities.	3.92	1.17
Materials used during the event allowed me to perform at my best level.	3.90	1.02
My team was prepared to participate in this event.	3.84	1.03
Distractions were limited.	3.54	1.17

*Note.* 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

Table 4

*Respondents' opinions on the importance of selected recognition methods.*

Items (N = 2145)	Mean	SD
Scholarships	4.52	0.84
Plaques/Medals/Trophies	3.60	1.06
Publicity, Local or Regional Newspaper Articles	3.33	1.14
Recognition at Award Functions	3.32	1.10
Internships with Event Sponsors	3.29	1.26
Main Stage Recognition	3.14	1.21
Certificates	2.90	1.16

*Note.* 5 = Most Important, 1 = Least Important.

More than two-thirds (68.6%, N = 1472) of respondents planned to attend a college or university as a full time student upon graduation from high school, and 6.5% (N = 140) plan to attend college on a part-time basis. An additional 4.7% (N = 101) plan to continue their education in a technical school. When asked what they would do if they attended college, 17.4% (N = 373) of members would pursue a degree in food, fiber and natural resources while 70.3% of members (N = 1508) would seek a degree in another career area. Thirty-five respondents have no future educational plans at the time this survey was administered. After high school, 16 students expect to become employed full-time in the food, fiber and natural resources industry and 19 students (0.9%) plan to seek full-time employment in an industry not related to agriculture.

Thirteen percent (N = 279) of respondents reported that they eventually intend to seek a career in the food, fiber and natural resource industry in which they will use the skills they learned as a direct result of their participation in a specific career development event. An additional 165 respondents (7.7%) plan to enter a food, fiber and natural resource career, but not in the CDE area in which they participated. Eight hundred and seven respondents (37.6%) plan to use the skills they learned in this event in a career not related to the food, fiber and natural resource industry. Skills notwithstanding, 346 respondents (16.1%) plan to pursue a career outside of the food, fiber and natural resource industry. Fifty-two students (2.4%) plan to enter military service

The majority of career development event coaches who completed the survey instrument were agriculture teachers (98.5%), and three out of every four career development event coaches were males (75.8%). Almost all of these coaches were Caucasian (96.1%), 2% were Native American, 1% Pacific Islander, and 1% Hispanic. There were no African American or Filipino respondents for the coaches' survey in the career development events at the 2003 National FFA Convention. Most of the teacher respondents (43.7%) had prepared between one and three teams for national competition. Slightly less than one-third (30.7%) of all CDE coach/respondents had taught for 21 years or more. Most of the respondents reported teaching in a comprehensive high school with grades nine through 12 (72.4%), and most of these schools are in a rural farm community (54.1%). The majority of respondents work in a one-teacher (43.3%) or a two-teacher (34.3%) program. Roughly three-fourths of the teacher respondents (77.7%) reported that less than half of the students they teach come from an agricultural background.

Most respondents (60.3%) believed that instruction about the area of agriculture represented by the career development event was integrated into their curriculum (see Table 5). The teacher-respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the career development events accurately evaluated student knowledge and ability (90.3%).

Table 5

*Teachers views on the relationship between classroom instruction and curriculum to career development events*

How the event related to classroom instruction.	Responses (N = 184)	
	Frequency	Percent
No relationship to the curriculum.	13	7.1
The curriculum included a unit of instruction.	48	26.1
The curriculum integrates several units of instruction.	111	60.3
The curriculum specialized in this area of agriculture.	12	6.5

Competition was the most frequent answer given by teacher-respondents (48.5% very important, 37.9% important) as the most important reason why students prepared for career development events (see Table 6). Teacher respondents also indicated that their encouragement often motivated students to prepare for career development events (41.9% very important, 30.3% important) and that travel and the fun associated with it were also very important reasons (30.7% very important, 33.7% important).

### **When Do Agriculture Teachers Train Their CDE Teams?**

Students were asked when they were trained for the CDE's. There was no single clear-cut answer. CDE teams appear to be trained during class time, after school, before school and on holidays and weekends. The data indicate most teachers use a combination of these times. However, there were some observable trends. It is a rare teacher who does all of the CDE training before school. Only .61 percent of the responses fell into this category while 13.5 percent of the responses indicate teachers never train CDE teams before school. The most

identified time to train CDE teams is after school (see Table 7). The majority of teachers spent one to five hours per week training students for national CDE competition (see Table 8).

Table 6

*Teacher-Respondents' perceptions of why students are motivated to prepare for the career development event.*

Item	N	Mean	SD
Competition	198	1.71	.86
Encouraged by agriculture teacher	198	2.01	1.10
Travel/fun	199	2.22	1.11
Development of leadership skills	198	2.25	1.12
Relationship to program curriculum	197	2.72	1.17
Relates to students' career choice	198	2.83	1.21

Note: 1 = most important, 5 = least important

Table 7

*When Agriculture Teachers Train Teams as Reported by Students*

	Never	Some Times	Moderately	Very Frequently	Always
During Class	6.04%	9.50%	4.37%	3.65%	1.39%
Before School	13.50%	7.21%	1.95%	1.56%	0.61%
After School	1.97%	7.38%	6.63%	6.66%	2.51%
On Holidays and Weekends	5.57%	9.94%	4.65%	3.56%	1.36%

Note. The National FFA had students check one of 11 categories (0%, 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%, 50%, 60%, 70%, 80%, 90%, and 100%) for each row of data. Because of the unwieldiness of these data, the data were regrouped into five categories (Never = 0%, Some Times = 10, 20 & 30%, Moderately = 40, 50 & 60%, Very Frequently = 70, 80, & 90%, Always = 100%). The number of responses in each category were summed and then divided by the grand total number of responses to derive a percentage.

Table 8

*Teacher-respondent estimates on the amount of time spent preparing students for the national FFA career development event*

How much time was spent preparing students for the event?	Responses (N = 192)	
	Frequency	Percent
All training completed during a scheduled agriculture class.	11	5.7
1-2 hours per week beyond classroom instruction	68	35.4
3-5 hours per week beyond classroom instruction	71	37.0
5-10 hours per week beyond classroom instruction	31	16.1
More than 10 hours per week beyond classroom instruction	11	5.7

### Conclusions, Discussion, Implications and Recommendations

Conclusion 1: Among a list of potential reasons why students participate in national FFA career development events, the most important reason selected by students was to learn skills

that will translate into a career option for them once they graduate from high school. Female participants are significantly more likely than males to participate because the career development relates to their career choice. Male participants are more likely than females to participate for leadership development and scholarships.

Conclusion 2: Even though almost half of the FFA members who participate in national career development events indicate that they do not plan to pursue careers in the food fiber and natural resource industry, they are generally pleased with the conduct of the events and find them valuable to their education.

Conclusion 3: The agriculture teacher primarily trains FFA members for national FFA career development events. This training generally lasts between one and five hours per week and will most likely occur after normal school hours.

Conclusion 4: Teachers and students in this study disagree as to the reason why members participate in national career development events. Teachers believe that the most important reason for participation is competition, but students indicate that their most important reason for participation is that the event relates to their career choice.

Some cynics may say that participation in national CDE's is, "Because the students won the state event." This answer is too simple because students choose whether or not they will advance to national competition. Furthermore, it does not explain why students chose to participate in career development events in the first place, nor does it explain why they chose to devote the time and effort necessary to be in a position to win the preliminary events leading up to the national event.

The concept of career development events rests largely on a system of competition, and it is surprising that students rank competition as the least of reasons behind their decision to prepare for a career development event. In addition to career choice, students also ranked leadership development and scholarship awards above competition, suggesting that students are becoming more concerned about developing skills in the competition that really matters to them – finding, acquiring, and building a career in a chosen occupation. In this case, career development events are succeeding because students believe that they are receiving content-specific instruction and are better prepared for a chosen career because of it.

The ratings given by member respondents indicate that the National FFA Organization is running a smooth operation with regard to career development events. Students know what is expected of them when they compete, and the event is structured so that students feel that they have done their best work.

If you wish to make a student happy upon completion of the career development event, it may be best to award a scholarship for exemplary achievement in addition to plaques and trophies. Many students in this study intend to go to college after their high school years, and financing a college education is very much on their minds. As more women move into executive leadership positions in business, there emerges an opportunity for the FFA and agricultural

education to deliver high quality business-oriented leadership training, and provide the scholarships necessary for young women to continue their education in college.

Out of the 2145 survey responses received from students at the 2003 career development events, none came from African American students. It would seem that if there were any African American students in the national career development events that at least one or two would have completed the survey instrument. The obvious implication is that African American students are an underserved population in agricultural education and FFA, especially when it comes to reaching the highest level of career development events. The obvious recommendation is for the agricultural education profession find ways to involve African American students in career development events, but a better investment of time and resources might be to find better ways to “turn them on” to agricultural careers. If the profession can convince African American students and their instructors that an agriculturally related career is an alternative for them, then perhaps we will see increased participation by them in national career development events.

Although students indicates their reason for participating in a national career development event was because it related to their career choice, a significant number of them planned to seek careers outside of the food, fiber and natural resources industry. Is this an indication that the mission of agricultural education has shifted more toward agricultural literacy than career preparation? Will the agricultural education profession be content serving a significant population of students who do not intend to pursue a career in the industry?

The lack of a discernable pattern in the training schedule for national career development events suggests that teachers are finding it difficult to schedule practices when all team members can be present. Teachers and students might be finding themselves dodging meetings, after school work schedules, after school transportation problems, and other school and FFA activities in search of the ideal practice time for CDE’s. Teachers may soon experience burnout if they spend too much of their personal time preparing students for career development events.

Teachers rated competition as the issue of primary importance while the students rated it the issue of least importance. Students rated career preparation as their primary reason for participation in national CDE’s while teachers rated it as the issue of least importance. One might suggest that teachers are overemphasizing competition at the expense of the students. However, a more accurate answer may be that competition is what keeps teachers motivated to prepare students for career development events year after year. The students are receiving awards and important career preparation, and the teachers are receiving recognition for having their students appear in a national career development event. The prestige of having won a state career development event and advancing to national competition may be one of the intangible rewards teachers earn in a life devoted to teaching.

As a result of this study, it is recommended that further research be conducted in the area of program planning and resource allocation in agricultural education programs. Teachers may need assistance in effectively managing their agricultural education program so that the amount of personal time needed for FFA activities during weekends and holidays can be significantly reduced. It is also recommended that the National FFA Organization partner with the agricultural education profession to seek ways to effectively strengthen diversity among students. The FFA

should also continue its system of evaluation for career development events. FFA career development events should maintain their relevancy as advances are made in the food fiber and natural resources industry.

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