

Attitudes of Oregon Vocational Agriculture Teachers
Toward the Supervised Occupational Experience Program
Component of the Vocational Agriculture Curriculum

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Since the beginning of high school vocational programs, the supervised occupational experience program (SOEP) has been considered an essential part of the student's overall education in agriculture. Founders of vocational education philosophy, such as Charles Prosser, addressed the importance of training on "actual jobs and not on exercises of pseudo jobs." (Prosser and Allen, 1925, pp. 202-203). In recent years, educators have expressed concern over the apparent diminution of the SOEP portion of the high school vocational agriculture program (Miller, 1981; Iverson and Brown, 1979).

Several studies have been conducted to determine the perceptions of vocational agriculture teachers toward the supervised occupational experience program. Smith (1983) found that vocational agriculture teachers in Oklahoma agreed that SOEP should be carried on outside the regular classroom, the SOEP helped prepare students for an agricultural vocation, and SOEPs were necessary for the adequate education of students in agriculture. Mlozi (1983) found that in West Virginia, vocational agriculture teachers' belief in the importance of SOEP and in their own ability to supervise were not considered problems preventing proper supervision. Excessive paperwork, few farm students in vocational agriculture, excessive family numbers and family demands on time were perceived as adversely influencing supervisory efforts. In Oregon, the subsiding emphasis placed on SOEPs in local vocational agriculture programs has been a concern noted by State Department of Education staff. Current economic conditions in the state have brought about severe cutbacks in the education budget for many school districts over the state.

A study should be made on SOEP because it is basic to quality vocational agriculture programs and because much concern has been expressed nationally over apparent decreasing emphasis placed on it by high school vocational agriculture teachers. The research study decided upon was to determine the attitudes of vocational agriculture teachers in Oregon regarding the role of SOEP and also to determine the effect that budget restrictions had on SOEPs.

Statement of the Problem

The main purpose of the study was to determine the attitudes of Oregon Vocational Agriculture teachers toward the SOEP component of their local vocational agriculture programs in light of the present economic climate. A second purpose was to compare the attitudes and

perceived support levels for those programs which have traditionally maintained strong SOEP programs with the attitudes and perceptions of vocational agriculture teachers who have not placed a strong emphasis on SOEP.

Research Objectives

The specific objectives of the study were to determine:

1. the attitudes of Oregon vocational agriculture teachers toward SOEP;
2. what differences exist between those vocational agriculture teachers who have traditionally emphasized the SOEP component of the program, and those vocational agriculture teachers who have not emphasized SOEP; and
3. the attitudes of the two groups with regard to changes made necessary in SOEP by budget restrictions.

Procedures and Methods

To obtain data for the study, an instrument was developed using a five-point scale to measure the attitudes of the respondents. The instrument was reviewed for reliability and validity using a panel of experts consisting of two teacher educators in agricultural education, one state supervisor for agricultural education, and four vocational agriculture teachers. A stratified random sample was selected. Stratification was based on:

1. those teachers whose programs have had strong emphasis on SOEP in the past and
2. those teachers whose programs have not placed a strong emphasis on SOEP in the past.

Assignment of programs to the two groups was determined by a panel of experts consisting of State Department of Education Agricultural staff and Oregon State University Agricultural Education faculty.

The data were collected by mailing the instruments to those selected in the sampling procedure. A follow-up letter was sent to those who failed to respond to the first mailing. Data were analyzed using frequency counts, means, and standard deviation, and the separate student's *t*-statistic.

Findings and Conclusions

The population, consisting of the 135 vocational agriculture teachers in Oregon, was stratified into two groups based on the re-

cognized emphasis placed on SOEP within the respective program. A sample of 45 vocational agriculture teachers was randomly drawn from each stratum. Thirty-six vocational agriculture teachers responded in each of the two categories for a total response of 72. This represented an 80% response rate for the total group and for each of the sub-groups.

Table 1 contains data resulting from the analysis of the survey instruments returned. The research objectives were considered in order of presentation.

Research Objective Number One: To Determine the Attitude of Vocational Agriculture Teachers in Oregon Toward SOEP

Column number three in Table 1 provides data important to the discussion of the attitudes of vocational agriculture teachers in Oregon toward SOEP.

Very high ratings of between 4.0 and 5.0 reflecting agreement were found for the following statements.

1. Each student should have a SOEP.
2. SOEP helps make agriculture programs vocational.
3. SOEPs are instrumental in preparing students for jobs in agriculture.
4. SOEPs should continue, and vocational agriculture teachers should supervise, even if the SOEP period is lost.
5. Employers can effectively assist with SOEP supervision.
6. Students should receive credit for SOEP.
7. Vocational agriculture teachers should have at least one period for SOEP supervision.
8. Vocational agriculture teachers should maintain records on mileage, student progress, and recommendations.
9. Each student should maintain accurate, up-to-date records related to their SOEP.
10. The vocational agriculture teacher is the only person who can do an effective job of SOEP supervision.

Very low ratings of between 1.0 and 2.0 reflecting disagreement was found with the following statements:

1. Because of current restrictions, the SOEP supervision period should be used for teaching extra classes.
2. The vocational agriculture teacher's summer contract should be reduced to help ease budget problems.

Table 1

Means, t-Values, and Probability Levels Describing Attitudes of Oregon Vocational Agriculture Teachers Toward SOEP

Survey item	(1) Teachers strongly emphasizing SOEP \bar{x}	(2) Teachers not strongly emphasizing SOEP \bar{x}	(3) Grand \bar{x} for both groups	(4) Separate t-test value group 1 vs 2	(5) Two-tailed probability group 1 vs 2
1. Each student in vocational agriculture should be involved with a Supervised Occupational Experience Program (SOEP).	4.765	4.235	4.500	2.87	0.0006*
2. SOEP helps make an agriculture program vocational.	4.794	4.471	4.632	2.12	0.039*
3. SOEP should be required of all vocational agriculture students.	4.441	3.500	3.971	3.11	0.0003*
4. SOEPs are very instrumental in preparing students for jobs in agriculture.	4.500	4.265	4.382	1.15	0.255
5. Because of current budget restrictions, the SOEP supervision period should be used for teaching extra classes.	1.765	1.710	1.738	0.21	0.831
6. Regardless of the loss of the SOEP periods, vocational agriculture teachers should continue SOEP and should make supervisory visits.	3.941	4.088	4.015	-0.54	0.590
7. The vocational agriculture teacher's summer contract should be reduced to help ease budget problems.	1.294	1.765	1.529	-2.16	0.035*
8. Each of the following can effectively assist with the supervision of SOEP:					
a) Advisory Committee members	3.382	3.206	3.294	0.53	0.600
b) FFA alumni members	3.353	3.061	3.209	0.94	0.352
c) The student's parent(s)	3.941	3.912	3.926	0.10	0.924
d) Employer(s) (where appropriate)	4.333	4.303	4.318	0.14	0.885
9. I would willingly accept a reduction in pay to remove the extended day and summer work from my contract.	1.353	1.606	1.478	-1.08	0.285
10. SOEP can effectively be conducted without summer contracts for vocational agriculture teachers.	1.235	1.636	1.433	-2.13	0.038*
11. SOEPs can be properly supervised through a close examination of student record books in school.	1.441	1.824	1.632	-1.43	0.145
12. My local administrators strongly support SOEPs as a vital part of the vocational agriculture program.	3.879	3.559	3.716	1.13	0.264
13. My administration fully understands the concept of SOEP.	3.618	3.353	3.485	0.95	0.347
14. As budgets get tight, the administrators at this school are looking to quality vocational programs to win support for the school's educational efforts.	3.294	3.424	3.358	-0.39	0.697
15. Students should receive credit for SOEP.	4.235	4.559	4.397	-1.59	0.117
16. The vocational agriculture teacher should have at least one scheduled class period per day for SOEP supervision.	4.234	4.273	4.299	0.22	0.827
17. The vocational agriculture teacher should maintain records of supervision including:	4.864	4.609	4.733	1.42	0.166
a) Mileage	4.765	4.441	4.603	1.75	0.087
b) Student progress	4.706	4.641	4.676	0.37	0.715
c) Recommendations	4.765	4.758	4.761	0.05	0.956
18. Each student should maintain accurate, up-to-date records related to their SOEP.	4.853	4.647	4.750	1.47	0.147
19. The vocational agriculture teacher is the only person who can do an effective job of SOEP supervision.	4.412	4.029	4.221	1.59	0.118
20. There should be a major shift toward employment of students rather than home production projects (entrepreneurship) to be consistent with economic realities of life today.	2.647	2.441	2.544	0.66	0.513

Note: Instrument scale 1 to 5 (strong agreement)
*probability at or beyond 0.05 level.

3. The vocational agriculture teachers would willingly request a reduction in pay to remove the extended day and summer work from their contracts.
4. SOEP can effectively be conducted without summer contracts for vocational agriculture teachers.
5. SOEPs can be properly supervised through close examination of student record books in school.

As a group, vocational agriculture teachers in Oregon strongly support the SOEP concept and are not interested in reducing their effort in this area, even to help compensate for budget restrictions of the current recession. Teachers perceive that quality SOEP can only be accomplished by commitment on the part of the teacher.

Research Objective Number Two: To determine what differences exist between vocational agriculture teachers in programs that have placed a strong emphasis on SOEP as compared to those teachers in programs which have not placed a strong emphasis on SOEP.

Columns one and two in Table 1 contain the means for the two groups in question. Column four contains the separate student t-test statistic for the means of the two groups, and column five contains the two tailed probability for the t-test statistic.

Of the twenty-six items, only five were found to be statistically significant at or beyond the .05 level of probability. Those five items were:

1. Teachers from programs with a strong SOEP emphasis rated "having each student involved with a SOEP" significantly higher than did teachers from programs which have not had strong SOEPs.
2. Teachers from programs with a strong SOEP emphasis rated SOEP as "making agricultural programs vocational" significantly higher than did the other teachers.
3. Teachers from programs with a strong SOEP emphasis rated "SOEP should be required of all vocational agriculture students" significantly higher than did the other teachers.
4. Teachers from programs which have not had a strong emphasis on SOEP were significantly more in agreement with the statement that "vocational agriculture teacher's summer contract should be reduced to help ease budget problems."
5. Teachers from programs which have not had a strong emphasis on SOEP were significantly more in agreement with the statement that "SOEPs can be effectively conducted without summer contracts for vocational teachers."

It can be concluded that teachers who were working in programs with a strong emphasis on SOEP assessed the value of SOEPs as helping make an agriculture program more vocational. These teachers believed that students should have SOEPs and that the vocational agriculture teacher should be the one to supervise the student's SOEP. These teachers were not interested in giving up on SOEP or supervision, even considering the effects of the economic recession.

Research Objective Number Three: To determine the attitudes of the two groups with regard to changes made necessary in SOEP by budget restrictions.

Reactions to survey items one, two, three, seven, and ten indicated that vocational agriculture teachers from programs which have traditionally had strong SOEPs would be less likely to yield on questions of SOEP requirements for students, supervision time, and procedures than would teachers from programs which have not emphasized SOEP. Note Table 1.

Discussion

It was noted that there were relatively high mean score ratings by both groups placed on supervising student SOEPs and maintaining records by students and the vocational agriculture teacher.

It seemed that there was some philosophical agreement about SOEPs and their value, but that in critical areas of philosophy such as "Does SOEP help make agricultural programs vocational?" and "Should SOEPs be required of all students?", there was statistically significant disagreement. It appeared that this amount of philosophical disagreement may have led to different levels of commitment on the part of vocational agriculture teachers. If it was believed that SOEPs have an impact on vocational decision-making and skill development (indicated by scores on item four), then why are SOEPs not required for all students?

If SOEP does make agricultural programs more vocational, thus providing more students with direct employment, it would appear important to maintain SOEP and SOEP supervision to help increase employment and reduce the financial burden on the school system.

Implications

1. Most vocational agriculture teachers believed in the value of SOEPs to programs of vocational agriculture. Teachers from programs which place a strong emphasis on SOEP will likely make a more concerted effort to maintain a requirement for SOEPs during an economic recession, as well as maintain supervision time for the required SOEPs.

2. Vocational agriculture teachers from programs which place an emphasis on SOEPs will likely be the ones supervising their students' SOEPs rather than having others do it.

Recommendations

1. Given the perceived value of SOEP, yet recognizing philosophical difference which may lead to differences in commitment to SOEP on the part of some vocational agriculture teachers, studies should be undertaken to determine what factors instill in potential vocational agriculture teachers a desire to do a quality job with SOEP. Potential sources of philosophic constructs regarding SOEP are as follows:
 - a) The teacher's own SOEP while in high school,
 - b) Courses at the university on SOEP, and
 - c) SOEP quality at the student teaching center.
2. A study should be undertaken to determine how to help potential vocational agriculture teachers make the transition from academic acceptance of philosophy to application of philosophy in the working world.
3. Efforts should be extended to assist vocational agriculture teachers with a strong commitment to SOEP to develop ways of substantiating the value of SOEP:
 - a) to the vocational development of the student and
 - b) to the economy of the local area.

References

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