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INVOLVEMENT OF VOLUNTEERS IN AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN NEW MEXICO

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Abstract

Enrollments in secondary agricultural education programs in New Mexico have steadily increased over the past several years placing more demands on the programs and their resources. A common approach in education is to enlist volunteers to provide assistance and extend resources. The purpose of this descriptive study was to investigate agricultural education teachers' attitudes toward volunteers, the perceived benefits and limitations of involving volunteers, and the types of roles in which volunteers were engaged. The population of this study was a census of all secondary and middle school agricultural education teachers in New Mexico during the Fall of 1999 (N = 90). A five-part instrument developed by the researchers was used to collect data. Agricultural education teachers strongly agreed that involving volunteers in their programs allowed them to focus on other parts of their programs, and that volunteers were an essential component to a successful agricultural education program. Eighty seven percent of the agricultural education teachers reported using volunteers in their program. Roles most commonly assumed by volunteers included: chaperones, guest speakers in class/lab, coaching CDE events, and assisting with various FFA activities. Of the 13% of the teachers who did not involve volunteers, the majority indicated that it was because they were new to the program, the program was too small, or too much time was required to properly supervise volunteers. Reported benefits of involving volunteers were: expanding the area of expertise and knowledge available to students, adding diversity and variety to the program, assisting with activities, and freeing the teacher to do other activities or work. Limitations cited were: time needed to train and supervise volunteers, communication breakdowns, personality conflicts, and lack of knowledge/expertise by the volunteer about the program, policies, discipline and/or subject area.

Introduction/Theoretical Framework

Agricultural education programs in New Mexico at the middle school and secondary level have had a steady increase in enrollment since 1985 (New Mexico State FFA Office, 2000). This parallels the national FFA membership numbers, which also have been, for the most part, steadily increasing since 1990. While larger enrollments are desirable and indicate that programs are thriving, they also place increasing demands on programs and staff. In order to fully meet students' needs and ensure that programs are as effective as possible, educators must continually look for ways to enhance and strengthen their educational programs. At the same time, they also must strive to keep teacher workloads manageable with the increased demands on time and resources. In addition, programs face challenges from rapidly advancing technology, the knowledge explosion, increasing costs, and changing demographics (Ohio Department of Education, 1988).

One approach to handling larger enrollments is to hire an additional agricultural education instructor. In many cases, sheer numbers of students necessitate additional faculty. An additional instructor also allows a program to increase course offerings. Another way to deal with increasing enrollments is to look for volunteers from the community.

Enlisting the aid of volunteers is nothing new. Every year, millions of Americans volunteer their time and assistance to causes that they consider worthwhile (Katz, 1982a;

Ohio Department of Education, 1988). Kongshem (1996) stated there is a resurgence in volunteerism throughout the country. The use of volunteers in the school setting provides an extra resource without adding costs to school budgets (Shifflett, 1994). Further, volunteers in the classroom and in other programs provide widespread benefits to students. Shifflett stated that academic achievement appears to increase when volunteers are used. Programs can be expanded to better meet students' needs when volunteers and their expertise are used. Parent volunteers for technology-related classroom and administrative tasks are beneficial for students and teachers alike (Ohlrich, 1996). While volunteers cannot be expected to replace paid personnel, they can make a significant contribution to their work (Katz, 1983).

The National School Volunteer Program, founded in 1956 in New York, formulated a set of objectives for using volunteers in schools. The objectives included:

1. To relieve professional staff of nonteaching duties.
2. To provide needed services to individual children to supplement the work of the classroom teacher.
3. To enrich the experiences of children beyond what is available in school.
4. To build better understanding of school problems among citizens and to stimulate widespread citizen support for public education (Carter & Dapper, 1974, p.52).

However, according to Umscheid (1991), the number of volunteers successfully involved in a program depend on a staff with a positive attitude toward volunteers and their involvement as a way to extend the teachers' own efforts. Elliot and Suvedi (1990) also found that teachers' positive perceptions about volunteers and the extent of help that volunteers can provide were related to the extent that the teachers used volunteers in their programs, and to the types of roles or jobs they were given.

Elliot and Suvedi (1990) also found that in agricultural education programs in Michigan, volunteers primarily served on advisory committees and assisted with field trips, SAE, and leadership activities within FFA. This is consistent with findings from Dormody and Seevers (1995) showing that more than 90% of all secondary agricultural education programs nationally had an advisory committee. They further concluded that those programs with an FFA alumni affiliate provided significant support and resources to the agricultural education program.

Although volunteers are being used in agricultural education programs, Elliot and Suvedi (1990) recommended that more volunteers should be used to help with classroom instruction, laboratory instruction, field trips and conventions, FFA skills contests, guidance and counseling, and recruitment. Additionally, teachers should be encouraged to use volunteers more frequently and effectively.

Despite the belief that volunteer involvement should increase, there is still a question of how fully the potential is being realized. The lack of information about how to use volunteers in agricultural education effectively inhibits the expansion of volunteer involvement (Katz, 1983). Umscheid (1991) identified the concern that Cooperative Extension Service agents do not use volunteers more effectively because they do not have confidence in their ability to delegate responsibilities to volunteers.

Limited studies have been conducted to identify how volunteers are involved in agricultural education settings. More and more demands with fewer resources are being placed on agricultural educators. What roles do volunteers assume in agricultural education programs?

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to describe the use of volunteers in New Mexico's agricultural education programs. The specific objectives of this study were to:

1. describe New Mexico agricultural education teachers on the characteristics of age, gender, ethnicity, number of years teaching, size of school, number of teachers in the department, and number of students enrolled in the program.

2. assess the attitude of agricultural education teachers toward the use of volunteers in agricultural education.
3. identify types of roles volunteers in New Mexico agricultural education programs assume.
4. identify the degree of helpfulness exhibited by volunteers as perceived by agricultural education teachers.
5. identify perceived benefits and limitations of using volunteers in agricultural education programs.

Methods/Procedures

The population for this descriptive study was a census of all secondary and middle school agricultural education teachers in New Mexico during Fall 1999 (N = 90). The most current list of teachers was obtained from the State Department of Education, Agricultural Education Office. For purposes of this study a volunteer was defined as "any person who gave freely of their time, expertise or resources to assist the agricultural education program."

A data collection instrument was developed by the researchers and contained five sections. The instrument was assessed for face and content validity by a panel of experts consisting of four teacher educators, the state supervisor of agricultural education, and the State Executive FFA Secretary. Section one included 16 statements to assess agricultural educators' attitudes towards volunteer involvement in their programs. Both positive and negative statements were included. A five point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree) was used. Section two determined if volunteers were used in the program. To determine roles of volunteers, educators were asked to respond to a list of 14 possible activities. For each activity listed, educators were to indicate the approximate number of volunteers used during the 1998-99 year. In addition, they were asked to estimate the approximate number of combined hours donated by the volunteers for the same year. An "other" category was provided for educators to write in an activity not appearing on the list. Types of roles ranged from chaperoning events to assisting with classroom instruction. Section three assessed degree of perceived helpfulness of volunteers involved in the program. Respondents rated volunteer involvement in 14 different activities on a five point Likert-scale (5 = Very Helpful and 1 = Not Helpful). An "other" category was available to write in a volunteer activity not included on the list. Also a "not applicable" category was provided if no volunteers were used by the educators in a particular activity. Section four included three open-ended questions related to the perceived benefits and limitations of using volunteers in agricultural education programs. The final section of the instrument included categorical and open-ended questions to obtain demographic information about the educators and their programs. Reliability of sections one and three was assessed using a pilot test procedure with 15 secondary agricultural educators randomly selected from Texas and Arizona. Section one yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .86. Section two had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .87.

Data were collected from November 1999 through January 2000, following the Dillman (1978) procedure for mail questionnaire administration. Three mailings were conducted to maximize response rate. A final usable response rate of 77 % (N = 69) was obtained. Nonresponse bias was controlled by comparing early to late respondents. No significant differences were found between the groups allowing generalizability of the findings to the total population (Miller & Smith, 1983). Objectives were analyzed using frequencies, means, standard deviations, and percentages.

Results/Findings

Objective One

The majority of the respondents were male (77.6%). The largest age category represented was in the 26 - 35 age range (41.2%). Eighty-two percent of the respondents were Caucasian and 12 % were Hispanic. Respondents had been teaching from 1-31 years with the highest frequency of respondents teaching only one or two years (21.7%). Sixty-four percent of those responding were the sole teacher in their program. Twenty six percent (18) worked in

two-teacher programs. The number of students enrolled in individual secondary agricultural programs varied from 8-565 students.

Objective Two

Table 1 provides frequencies, means, and standard deviations of 15 statements about the attitude of secondary agricultural educators regarding the use and involvement of volunteers in their program. Individual items in Table 1 contributed toward the overall domain of attitude towards the use of volunteers. A summated mean score is reported. Attitude was measured using an anchored Likert scale with the following categories: 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Disagree, and 5 = Strongly Disagree. Negatively stated items were recoded.

Overall, agricultural educators indicated a positive attitude toward the involvement of volunteers in their programs. Educators strongly believed that involving volunteers

Table 1
Attitudes toward use and involvement of volunteers in secondary agricultural education programs. (N = 68)

	Percent						
	SA	A	U	D	SD		
	%	%	%	%	%	Mean	SD
My administration supports the use of volunteers in school settings.	36.8	57.4	4.4	1.5	0.0	1.70	.62
Administrative support is essential for successful utilization of volunteers in schools.	25.4	58.2	9.0	7.5	0.0	1.98	.80
Using volunteers in my program allows me to focus on different aspects of the program.	13.2	61.8	17.6	7.4	0.0	2.19	.75
The benefits of involving volunteers outweighs additional expenses to my program.	16.2	51.5	25.0	7.4	0.0	2.23	.81
Volunteers make my job easier.	14.7	48.5	22.1	14.7	0.0	2.36	.91
Volunteers should be involved in the educational part of the program as well as the activities.	5.9	57.4	22.1	13.2	1.5	2.47	.85
Volunteers are good teachers.	8.8	51.5	22.1	14.7	2.9	2.51	.95
Supervising volunteers takes too much time.	4.4	51.5	29.4	13.2	1.5	2.55	.83
Agricultural education programs need volunteers to be effective.	7.4	52.9	16.2	22.1	1.5	2.57	.96

Table Continues

Table 1 Continued

	Percent						
	SA	A	U	D	SD		
	%	%	%	%	%	Mean	SD
Using volunteers adds additional expenses to my program.	5.9	52.9	19.1	17.6	4.4	2.61	.99
My program depends on the support of volunteers.	8.8	47.1	17.6	22.1	4.4	2.66	1.05
Volunteers require too much supervision.	2.9	42.6	33.8	19.1	1.5	2.73	.85
It is easier to do things myself than train a volunteer.	2.0	36.8	25.0	29.4	5.0	2.98	1.01
Volunteers can take on almost any aspect of the agricultural education program with the right supervision.	2.9	38.2	23.5	25.0	10.3	3.01	1.08
Volunteers are a necessary nuisance.	0.0	13.4	20.9	58.2	7.5	3.59	.81
There are some roles volunteers should not assume.	0.0	0.0	0.0	39.7	60.3	4.60	.49

Summated Mean = 2.67 1 = Strongly Agree; 5 = Strongly Disagree

in their programs allowed them to focus on other aspects of their program and that agricultural education programs need volunteers to be effective. Although there was agreement that using volunteers adds expenses to the program, it was strongly supported that the benefits of involving volunteers outweighed those additional expenses. Educators also agreed that administrative support for using volunteers in the program is essential. While most educators supported the value of volunteers to their programs, there also was agreement that supervision of volunteers takes too much time. The summated mean for assessing agriculture educators attitudes toward the use and involvement in secondary agricultural education programs was 2.67.

Table 2
Roles of volunteers in New Mexico agricultural education programs

Activity	% of teachers using volunteers	# of volunteers		Avg. # of volunteer hours
		N	Mean per activity	
Classroom instruction	40.6	79	2.8	28.5
Laboratory instruction	44.9	101	2.6	27.8
Advisory committees/board	58.0	318	7.0	29.4
Guest speaker in lab/class	71.0	154	2.3	7.7
Field trip coordinator/host	50.7	107	2.3	8.6
Coaching CDE events	68.1	155	2.3	61.0
Chaperoning conferences, etc.	75.4	206	3.3	108.1
Fund raising	50.7	360	10.5	105.8
SAEP (other than parent/guardian)	24.6	62	3.4	54.1
Assisting with FFA activities (contests, judgings, fairs, etc.)	62.3	387	10.7	107.5
Assisting with office operations	5.8	9	1.0	33.5
Marketing the program	18.8	88	5.7	43.4
Recruiting	15.9	64	5.6	27.5
Evaluating the Program	30.4	127	8.1	12.1

Objective 3

The majority (87%) of the agricultural educators in New Mexico were using volunteers in their agricultural education programs. Table 2 indicates that teachers reported using volunteers most frequently as chaperones; guest speakers in classes/labs; coaches for CDE events; and to assist with various FFA activities, such as contests, fairs, etc. This is consistent with findings from Elliot & Suvedi (1990).

Only 58% of the teachers that reported using volunteers indicated their involvement on advisory committees. Dormody and Seevers (1995) reported a much higher involvement of advisory committees nationally. Volunteers were least involved in assisting with office operations, recruiting students, and marketing the program. The highest numbers of volunteers statewide were involved assisting with FFA activities (387), fundraising (360), and serving on advisory committees (318). Volunteer activities with the fewest number of volunteers engaged were assisting with office operations (9), SAE projects (62), and recruiting new students (64). The average number of hours contributed by volunteers varied greatly according to activity. Activities requiring a longer duration, such as chaperoning or assisting with FFA activities at fairs or contests, involved more volunteer hours than serving as a guest speaker in a classroom or lab.

Table 3
Perceived helpfulness of volunteer involvement by activity

		Percent							
		5	4	3	2	1	NA		
Activity	N	%	%	%	%	%	%	Mean	SD
Assist with office operation	57	5.3	7.0	7.0	5.3	10.9	64.9	4.85	1.78
Chaperoning	59	62.7	18.6	5.1	1.7	0.0	11.9	4.77	.78
Marketing the program	56	10.7	14.3	12.5	5.4	5.4	51.8	4.75	1.57
Recruiting	55	10.9	7.3	14.5	10.9	3.6	52.7	4.69	1.64
Fund raising	59	39.0	22.0	8.5	3.4	3.4	23.7	4.61	1.23
SAE (other than parent/guardian)	56	16.1	16.1	19.6	7.1	1.8	39.3	4.55	1.45
Advisory committee	59	39.0	22.0	16.0	0.0	3.4	18.6	4.49	1.17
Laboratory instruction	58	20.7	29.3	13.8	1.7	5.2	29.3	4.46	1.36
Coaching CDE events	58	53.4	20.7	6.9	5.2	3.4	10.3	4.46	1.15
Evaluating the program	56	10.7	21.4	21.4	7.1	1.8	37.5	4.44	1.45
Assisting w/FFA activities (contents, fairs, judgings)	57	50.9	31.6	7.0	5.3	0.0	5.3	4.43	.90
Classroom instruction	59	11.9	27.1	15.3	3.4	8.5	33.9	4.32	1.56
Guest speaker in class/lab	60	40.0	38.3	10.0	5.0	1.7	5.0	4.25	1.00
Field trip coordinator/host	58	15.5	32.8	22.4	3.4	5.2	20.7	4.12	1.35

Note: 5 = Very Helpful; 1 = Not Helpful; NA = Not Applicable
Summated Mean = 4.54; SD = 1.34

Objective 4

Of the 87% of the agricultural educators who indicated they used volunteers in their programs, the overall degree of perceived helpfulness was very high. Perceived helpfulness of volunteers was measured using a 5 point Likert scale where 5 = Very Helpful and 1 = Not Helpful. A not applicable (NA) category also was included. The mean score for all 14 activities was rated 4.1 or higher with a summated mean of 4.52 and a corresponding standard deviation of 1.34. (Table 3)

Objective 5

Responding to an open-ended question format, teachers were asked to indicate their perceived benefits and limitations of using volunteers in agricultural education. Although 58 individual responses were listed, several common themes emerged. Many respondents indicated that use of volunteers was a way to broaden the area of

expertise and knowledge available to students. One teacher stated, "Agricultural educators have some favorite or specialized areas and do need help in other areas in order to get all students educated to the fullest." Other benefits identified included adding diversity and variety to the program; assisting with fund raising, chaperoning, and activities; freeing the teacher to do other activities or work with other students; and providing more opportunities for students. Many teachers indicated that a major benefit was increased community involvement and participation. "Involvement by members of the community increases "buy in" for program success. Volunteers bridge the school and community gap, which helps the school program in teacher/parent/ administration interactions."

Limitations of involving volunteers also varied. Of concern was the time needed to properly train and orient volunteers. One teacher stated: "training volunteers in classroom and lab management as well as ensuring you have picked the right person for the right job, takes too much time." Other barriers identified include personality and power conflicts, poor communication, and lack of knowledge/expertise by the volunteer about the program, policies, student discipline, and/or subject area.

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

Agricultural education teachers in New Mexico have a positive attitude toward involvement of volunteers in their programs. There was agreement that volunteers are an important part of the agricultural education program, that use of volunteers provides many benefits, and involving qualified volunteers in various functions and activities frees the teacher to focus on other aspects of the program. Overall, it was believed that volunteer involvement in programs made the teachers' job easier. Of the 13% of teachers who did not use volunteers in their programs, the majority indicated that it was because they were new to the program, the program was too small, or they did not have the time to properly supervise volunteers.

State and national statistics indicate that not only is the number of agricultural education programs growing, but the availability of qualified teachers is shrinking (Camp, 2000). Involving community volunteers is essential in maximizing resources and meeting needs. Teachers must look to the community and actively engage individuals to serve as volunteers.

Not only did teachers believe that volunteers were essential to their programs, there was strong agreement that volunteers should be involved in educational aspects of the programs as well as support efforts. Elliot and Suvedi (1990) found that volunteers in Michigan agricultural education programs served primarily on advisory committees and assisted with field trips and FFA activities. This also is consistent with findings by Dormody and Seevers (1995). Volunteers in New Mexico were active in support activities such as chaperoning, fund raising, and assisting with FFA activities, but they also were involved in educational activities such as laboratory and classroom instruction, serving as a guest speaker in class/lab, and coaching CDE events. New Mexico agricultural educators stated that volunteers not only add a wealth of knowledge and experience to programs, but also bring a variety of viewpoints to the educational arena.

Involving volunteers with special skills and expertise is a way to broaden the knowledge base available to students and allow teachers to focus on other areas. Volunteers with backgrounds and expertise in a variety of topics are available and willing in every community. The volunteer experience will be most successful, however, when the agricultural educator determines specifically what his/her needs are, matches the individual with the need, and provides clear and specific guidance about roles, responsibilities, and needs. Agricultural educators in New Mexico rated the helpfulness provided by volunteers in their programs as very high, clearly indicating with proper planning and coordination that volunteers can be an asset to programs.

Successful use of volunteers requires some degree of supervision. Findings indicate that while volunteers are perceived to be a positive resource to programs, supervision of volunteers takes too much time. In-service training for teachers on

strategies for recruiting, supervising and coordinating volunteers could strengthen programs and greatly minimize or eliminate some of the barriers or limitations described. Opportunities for in-service training and support in volunteer management should be made available to teachers through appropriate sources, such as teacher conferences, workshops, credit options, and newsletters. Incentives to motivate and encourage educators should be provided and teachers successfully using volunteers should be recognized and rewarded.

Clear communication about needs and expectations is essential. Teachers are encouraged to develop a volunteer handbook that outlines policies, procedures, expectations, and guidelines for using volunteers in their programs. Although time and effort will be necessary at first to develop a comprehensive handbook, it can be used repeatedly as needed with only minor revisions or updates. An orientation meeting with volunteers at the beginning of each school year or prior to an activity or event should be conducted to clearly communicate expectations. Copies of selected materials in the handbook, such as school policies or discipline procedures, should be duplicated and provided to volunteers at the orientation meeting.

Agricultural education teachers in New Mexico clearly indicated that administrative support is essential for successful use of volunteers in schools. Security and issues of safety have become prime concerns for almost every school district. As such, individuals on school grounds without approval or authorization are considered to be a potential threat. The safety and well-being of students must be paramount to all involved. Consequently, it is essential for administrators to not only understand the uniqueness of agricultural education programs but also the vital role the community and its citizens have in contributing to it's overall success. Teachers need to discuss with administrators the roles and responsibilities volunteers will be assuming. Whenever possible, a list of names and responsibilities of volunteers should be provided to the school office. Administrators are encouraged to visit the agricultural education program facilities to meet and observe volunteers involved in their school.

Volunteers are perceived to be a valuable community resource and should be involved whenever possible in agricultural education programs. Good communication, organization, and management of the volunteer program will establish a solid and beneficial partnership.

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