Experiences of Hispanic Students Enrolled in Secondary Agricultural Education Programs

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Abstract

Nearly 52% of the 72,445 [state] students enrolled in agricultural education are Hispanic. However, when many of these programs participate in leadership development activities beyond the local level, the diversity of their participants fails to mirror that of their enrollment. Many teachers are at a loss as to what they can do to cultivate the talent of these students.

In this phenomenological study, a focus group interview was conducted at a [state] high school agriculture program with the reputation for strong Hispanic student engagement. Nine Hispanic agriculture students were invited to participate. The purpose of the study was to interpret the phenomenon of Hispanic student engagement in a secondary agriculture program. The following questions guided the work: How do Hispanic students (1) perceive, and (2) experience the secondary agriculture program?

Findings suggest the accumulation of strong family support, financial help from the community, and welcoming advisors create positive opportunities for program experiences. The students perceptions of the program are related to keeping their school’s legacy alive, maintaining a family-like atmosphere to promote an inviting environment for prospective members, and to not only preserve but surpass the achievements and memories previous students have built. Final recommendations include having: (1) teachers establish a strong connection with students and their families and (2) older students in the program mentoring new students.
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Table of Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................................... i
Acknowledgements......................................................................................................... ii
Chapter One – Introduction ......................................................................................... 1
  Statement of the Problem .......................................................................................... 1
  The Importance of the Project ................................................................................... 2
  Purpose of the Project ............................................................................................... 2
  Definition of Important Terms .................................................................................. 2
  Summary ..................................................................................................................... 4
Chapter Two – Review of Literature ........................................................................... 5
  Introduction ............................................................................................................... 5
  Hispanic Population Growth ...................................................................................... 5
  College Major Choice for Students of Color ............................................................. 5
  Agriculture Teacher Statistics ................................................................................... 6
  Advisor’s Role in Sustained Commitment ................................................................. 7
  Mentoring .................................................................................................................. 8
  Getting Students Involved ......................................................................................... 8
  Hispanic students in agricultural education and the FFA .......................................... 9
  Summary .................................................................................................................... 10
Chapter Three - Methods and Materials .................................................................... 11
  Phenomenology ........................................................................................................ 11
  Criterion-Based Sampling ........................................................................................ 11
  Student Participants .................................................................................................. 12
  Examination of the Data ........................................................................................... 13
  Summary .................................................................................................................... 13
Chapter Four - Results and Discussion ...................................................................... 14
Chapter Five – Summary, Recommendations, and Conclusion ............................ 17
  Summary .................................................................................................................... 17
  Recommendations .................................................................................................... 17
  Conclusions .............................................................................................................. 18
References..................................................................................................................... 19
Appendices .................................................................................................................... 21
  Appendix A. Poster presented at national conference of Minorities in Agriculture,
  Natural Resources and Related Sciences 2014......................................................... 21
Chapter One

Introduction

The National FFA consists of a huge population of members who come from different backgrounds and lifestyles. Although these students might have a lot of differences, they have a special understanding and bond that connects them together. All these students have the opportunity to participate, compete, and get involved in Future Farmer of America (FFA). Whether it is at a local chapter, or a national competition, members have the chance to test and exhibit their talents and abilities.

Statement of Problem

Hispanic students currently make up 22% of the national FFA membership (Future Farmers of America, FFA 2011). In [state] alone 52% of the membership is Hispanic ([State] Department of Education, 2013a). With these impressive numbers, one would expect to see a lot of Hispanics participating in competitions and events, but this is not the case. The problem is that Hispanic members are not seen participating above the chapter level. There is one exceptional exception to this story, which is [School A] FFA Chapter.

Since the percentage of Hispanic FFA members is so high, theoretically Hispanic member involvement should be equivalent. In reality at all the conferences, competitions, and events that the FFA holds there is a skewed amount of participants. It is important to find out what is driving members of the [school A] FFA to participate in activities above the chapter level. After interviewing the [school A] focus group, the analysis and results can help other
advisors and FFA leaders increase the amount of Hispanic member participation in a local chapter or as large as an entire state.

The Importance of the Project

The importance of the project is to find out why Hispanic students from the [School A] FFA chapter are so willing to participate above the chapter level. The information gathered from this focus group can help Hispanic member in the FFA take advantage of all the opportunities that the FFA has to offer them.

Purpose(s) of the Project

The project is to have a focus group of 9 students from the [School A] FFA. During this discussion the hope is to gain information on what is motivating them to continuously participate in the FFA. By gaining the students perspective, this can help other chapters inspire their members to be involved.

Definition of Important Terms Hypothesis

- **FFA**: The National FFA Organization is a dynamic youth organization that changes lives and prepares students for premier leadership, personal growth and career success through agricultural education. An example of what works well in, FFA is an intracurricular organization that implements the three-circle model of education – classroom instruction, hands-on learning and leadership development through FFA programs (FFA, 2013).

- **Agricultural Education Program**: Agricultural education is a systematic program of instruction available to students desiring to learn about the science, business, technology of plant
and animal production and/or about the environmental and natural resources systems (FFA, 2013).

· **Hispanic Student**: A student of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race (Boser, 2011).

· **FFA Competitions**: FFA holds a variety of competitions including, but not limited to: public speaking, career developments events, and judging contests.

· **FFA Conferences**: The FFA holds a variety of conferences to promote leadership. These conferences reach from regional to national levels.

· **[School A]**: Participating school, with a Hispanic population of over 94%; [School A] is the largest city in its county with a graduation rate of 81.91%, 5.65 percentage points over the state average ([State] Department of Education, 2013b).

· **Above the chapter level**: FFA has different levels of participation. The order from smallest to largest goes as followed: chapter, sectional, regional, state, and national.

  o **Chapter Level**: The heart of the National FFA Organization is at the local chapter level. FFA chapter may be chartered in any public school with an agricultural program. Leadership is provided by student officers who are elected each year by the chapter’s members, and by the agriculture teacher who serves as the advisor for the chapter (FFA, 2013).

  o **Sectional Level**: A section can be considered like a county, so it includes local chapters and the surrounding schools.

  o **Regional Level**: Larger areas that section off a state.

  o **State Level**: Includes all the regions in the state.
o **National Level:** Includes all the states.

**Summary**

This project will focus on why Hispanic students in the [School A] FFA are so willing to participate in activities. Hispanic members make up about half of the membership in the [state] FFA, yet they are not active in competitions or conferences. It is important that students feel comfortable and have the tools necessary to participate in such events.

This project will be a focus group of 10-15 students from the [School A] FFA Chapter. The discussion will focus around how the students started off in the FFA and what kept them around. These students are an exception to what is currently happening in the FFA. The ideal outcome of the project will be to find out what is helping the members stay involved and how it can be implemented in other chapters.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

As the population of the United States continues to increase, the Hispanic population continues to increase at a higher rate. The [state] Hispanic population has seen rapid growth, growing 27.6% from 2000 to 2010 (US Department of Commerce, 2012). As the Hispanic population increase, so will the amount of Hispanic students in schools. Statistics show that 52% of students enrolled in agricultural program are Hispanic, yet when you look beyond the local level, participation does not mirror demographics ([State] Department of Education, 2013a). The purpose of this study was to examine Hispanic students experiences in the secondary agricultural program. The following chapter reviews Hispanics in; agricultural education in secondary agricultural programs, higher education, academic setting, mentoring, career paths, and advisor’s role.

Hispanic Population Growth

Maceli and Box (2010) state, “Hispanic population is the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States, however the educational success of Hispanic students has not kept pace with the increasing population.” This study looks to find the “pupil characteristics or identifiable traits that influence Hispanic students persistence in a business higher education.”

College Major Choice for Students of Color

The US Census shows that the United State’s population of diverse cultures continues to grow. The amount of enrollment of secondary students reflects this trend (Davis & Bauman,
2011). Unlike student enrollment, the amount of diverse teachers is not growing. This study is attempting to find the motivating factors of students of color pursuing careers in Agricultural Education (Vincent, 2012). This study found that an internal value drove the individuals to choose careers in Agricultural Education. Rather than power or money becoming the driving force, the participants valued passion and knowledge (Vincent, Henry, and Anderson, 2012). Externally, the participants were motivated by, “the possibility of two areas: advancement, and/or strengthening connections in agricultural education and related disciplines” (Vincent, Henry, and Anderson, 2012). Overall there were three main factors that emerged in their decision-making:

1. **Personal**: which is how a participant felt about their academic and professional environment
2. **Familial**: the family’s and culture’s views on academics and professional environment
3. **Structural**: is the individual’s connection to the academic and professional environment

**Agriculture Teacher Statistics**

As has been the case for many years the agricultural education community still lacks diversity to a proportion that would not be tolerated by many state and federal agencies (Kantrovich, 2010) Of the he 731 newly qualified teachers, 394 were females and 338 were males. White non-Hispanic males totaled 324 and females 381, 4 individuals were Native American/Alaskan decent that were newly qualified 2 males and 2 females. A total of 7 African American, consisting of 3 males and 4 females, and again 15 Hispanic: 9 male and 6 female that were prepared nationally in 2009 (Kantrovich, 2010) White, non Hispanic teacher represented
685 of all teachers reported with unknown ethnicity second with 28% or 2,349 teachers. African American teachers make up 15% or 133 teachers while there are 107 (1.2%) Hispanic teachers.

**Advisor’s Role in Sustained Commitment**

The purpose of this journal of Hispanic Higher education is to give “preliminary competencies” to advisors of Hispanic student organizations (HSO’s) in higher education. The journal lists and describes 10 competencies that are believed necessary to effectively advise (HSO’s). Due to the “referent” power of an advisor had member of the college or university, and therefore can facilitate or impede the growth and the development of both Hispanic student groups and individual students.

As stated by Delgado-Romero & Hernandez (2002) the 10 competencies include: 1. Advisors know the many ways that Hispanic students identify themselves, 2. Advisors understand ethnic identity development and acculturation, 3. Advisors strive for cultural empowerment, 4. Advisors understand and work with differences, 5. Advisors are aware of the scarcity of Hispanic faculty and staff, 6. Advisors are aware of their own biases, 7. Advisors are aware of specific cultural values, 8. Advisors foster leadership, 9. Advisors involve La Familia, Community Members, and Alumni, 10. Advisors actively deal with racism and oppression. What is know is that Hispanic student organizations can play a vital role in providing support, thus it is imperative that organizations have trained, knowledgeable, caring, and involved faculty advisors who can facilitate the transition from home to school to work for underrepresented Hispanic/Latino (a) populations (Delgado et al.).
Mentoring

Research shows that great leaders at some point have had mentors who helped them reach their career goals. Hispanic minorities have problems finding someone to advise them (Knouse). According to McManus and Russell, mentoring is a developmental relationship between senior and junior individuals in organizations. There are two different functions in mentoring, Career Enhancing Function and Psychosocial Function. The Career Enhancing Function focuses more on molding the protégé career, whether it is networking with other contacts or exhibiting certain professional behaviors (Ragins ad Kram, 2007; Steinberg and Mourizadeh, 2001). The psychosocial focuses more on a personal aspect of the protégé where a mentor can provide support when something does not go as planned.

When it comes to working with students of a different culture it is important for teachers to understand their background and culture, so that they can work with their customs and traditions. This is called acculturation that is, “the ability of an individual from one culture to adapt the norms, values, and behaviors of another culture” (Domino, 1992). Domino also reveals that acculturation is preferred among the Hispanic culture rather than assimilation, which is replacing ones culture. Key factors that come into play for Hispanic culture are: Family Emphasis, Sense of Community, The Spanish Language, and Religion (Knouse, 2013).

Getting Students Involved

For the McCartney research 10 Hispanic immigrant students were investigated to explore the experiences they’ve had while living and attending a high school in the United States. All students were non-English speakers. (McCartney, 2012) would also add that Hispanic student
tend to focus better on short-term goals, while also preferring cooperative learning teaching methods. While these methods can help a student succeed in the class, their involvement in the school program can be increased through financial assistance, mentoring, and creating a family like environment leading to more students to understand and navigate through the American culture and retain a connection to their culture (McCartney, 2012).

**Hispanic students in agricultural education and the FFA**

Roberts, Hall, Briers, Gill, Shinn, Larke, and Jaure (2009) performed a study on three different schools where they implemented six intervention strategies to increase Hispanic participation in the FFA and agricultural education. The six interventions were:

1. **FFA or Agricultural Education Experiences for student opinion leaders**
2. **Experiences for parents, alumni, boosters, and school administrators**
3. **Professional Development for teachers**
4. **Curricula and Educational Materials**
5. **On-site Advisor (Change Agent)**
6. **University and National FFA leadership and oversight**

All three schools increased, Hispanic student enrollment and participation, and parent/alumni involvement. The study’s data showed that participation was positively influenced by, “peer opinion, personal aspirations, high expectations, and recognition” (Roberts et al. (2009)).
Summary

It is important to have a depth of knowledge of the Hispanic populations before beginning the research. The Hispanic population is continually increasing; for the Hispanic students to continue in their education and involvement in the program they need guidance. Mentorship can encourage students to move through secondary education. Mentoring is also a great way to show students the opportunities the agricultural industry to offer, which then motivates students to pursue a post secondary education in an agriculture related field. Having more diverse students pursue a post-secondary education will also help combat the lack of diversity the agriculture instruction profession currently holds. Lastly, it is vital the agriculture profession gain diversity to encourage diverse students to follow post secondary education.
Chapter Three

Methods and Materials

The purpose of this senior project is to determine the reasons for which Hispanic students stay involved in the agriculture program, beyond the local level. This research will give agriculture instructors recommendations to retain the participation of Hispanic students beyond the classroom and local level. This will give Hispanic students the chance to experience the many opportunities the agriculture program has to offer.

Phenomenology

A qualitative phenomenological study was done to extract the groups experiences and ideas. Phenomenology is taking a groups experiences and relating them to a common topic (Creswell, 1998; Grbich, 2007). In this environment people are able to express their opinion without judgment or bias.

Criterion-based Sampling

Criterion based sampling was used in order to select the high school and the participants. Both had to meet minimum qualification in order to take part in the focus group. Two panels were created to select the participating school and students. In order to be selected the school had to meet these minimum requirements: (a) a majority of students designated as “Hispanic”, (b) Hispanic student participation reflects demographic data, (c) offer a variety of agriculture courses, and (d) maintain a reputation as an active chapter in FFA and SAE.

For the 2012-2013 academic year, [State] reported 51% of students enrolled in secondary agricultural education identified as Hispanic ([State] Department of Education, 2013a). In the
[region], 58% of agricultural education students were Hispanic. [School A] lies within [State’s] [region] and reported over 92% of its student body as Hispanic ([State] Department of Education, 2013b). Furthermore, the agricultural education program within that school reported a similar composition with 94% of the members being Hispanic ([State] Department of Education, 2013a).

A second expert panel made up of the school’s agricultural education teachers identified and recruited potential student participants. Students must be: (a) classified ethnically as Hispanic, (b) enrolled in the [school] agricultural education program for the 2013-2014 academic year, (c) active members of the FFA, and (d) have a viable SAE.

**Student Participants**

Nine individuals were involved in the semi-structured focus group; consisting of 6 males and 3 females. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms have been created for the students involved in the study. The student participants included: **Susana**, a fourth year student currently serving as chapter president and a sectional officer; **Ana**, a second year student and currently the chapter secretary; **Nancy**, a second year student currently serving as the chapter historian; **Eric**, a third year student who has taken a number of different courses in the program; **Santiago**, a second year student enrolled in agriscience courses; **Juan**, an upperclassmen who has found his passion in the welding shop; **Ruben**, a young man who has been in the program for 3 years and is currently serving as the chapter sentinel; **Julio** a third year student and chapter Vice President; and **Diego** a fourth year student who is well on his way to becoming a program completer.
Examination of the Data

The researchers created open-ended questions to engage student participation, the interview lasted an hour and a half. After the interview, transcripts were created using the digital audio and cross-checked for accuracy by the participants. In order to establish credibility, all researchers involved developed and reviewed subjectivity statements. After transcribing, thematic data analysis was used to group common topics and relate them to themes. These themes summarized what the students experienced in the secondary agricultural program.

Summary

The purpose of this senior project is to determine the reasons for which Hispanic students stay involved in the agriculture program, beyond the local level. In order to determine the reasoning behind the student’s involvement, a qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to determine the experiences and ideas Hispanic students have of this particular agricultural program at [School A]. Two expert panels were constructed in order to select the school and the participants. Both the students and school had to meet minimum qualifications in order to take part in the semi structured focus group. After the one and a half hour interview, the digital audio was transcribed and crosschecked with the participants. Lastly, thematic data analysis was used to group common topics and relate them to overall themes; these themes are the reasons why students stay committed to the program.
Chapter Four

Results and Discussion

In the following chapter you will find the research poster summarizes the study. The poster includes the overall themes found through our research. This poster was entered in the MANRRS, Minorities in Agriculture Natural Resources and Related Sciences, National Research Poster Competition. (See Appendix A for poster) The poster was presented in Birmingham, Alabama during the 2014 MANRRS National Conference by Karina Salomon and Jose Vargas. The poster “Experiences and Perceptions Hispanic Secondary Students have of Agricultural Education Participation” was top 10 of the 40 submissions. The information can be used by instructors as a starting point to engage Hispanic students; thus encouraging them to participate beyond the local level. To provide clarity and an insight into student thought, participant quotes are included. The following question guided the research: How do Hispanic students experience the secondary agriculture program? The students accounts and perceptions are categorized in the following themes:

- **Family as Program Entry** - My brother introduced me. I would say the next big thing was the motivation from Mr. Hernandez. I never had him as a teacher but because he knew my brother, he pushed me to do certain things. – Diego

- **Family as Interaction** - My parents don’t speak English and most of the teachers are English people and then Vega and Hernandez speak Spanish. My parents have come when we would do a meeting or clean and they would talk to them. - Ruben

- **Family as Environment** - No matter where you come from we can trust each other and we can become like a family and that’s what’s special about our group. – Susana
• **Mentoring** - My freshmen year, we were learning the Creed and Mr. Mariani saw a spark in me I didn’t see in myself. He thought I could go far beyond this chapter, and introduced me to more members so I felt more comfortable. - Nancy

• **Overcoming Barriers** - I’m not afraid to admit I come from a broken family. He (my dad) likes what the program does and he likes the person I have become but his is the only income coming into the house. Money doesn’t stretch that far. I’ve had issues with traveling and overnight trips. I love McDonald’s because of that. It’s cheap. I mean, it may not be the healthiest food but it tastes good in my stomach. I don’t go all out when I spend my money, I conserve it and use what I have to get what I can eat. - Eric

• **Legacy** - A legacy is not knowing much about ag and somehow becoming extremely successful in the program. Most of us don’t come from that background. When you hear the story, you’re like, ‘That’s like me, I didn’t know anything about ag, but if they did it, I can do it.’ I think that’s the main concept and I think that leaves a legacy behind for all of us to follow. – Diego

• **Unity** - It’s not only the memories you make but the people that you share it with. You come back here, like Monday after a judging contest, and you and your friends have an inside joke, and you all start cracking up laughing with one look. It’s fun. – Nancy

• **Cultural Heritage** - You don’t have to go far to realize why this chapter works so differently from others. The structure and the base are way different. You go to other chapters, and the advisors choose who they want to work with. They want to be represented as best as they can. But at the same time you’re cutting people out from enjoying the experience we had. In our chapter, whomever shows interest gets to do it. - Diego
• **Personal Development** - *It is like the ganas (Spanish for desire) to succeed. To be a better person, you can’t throw away the opportunities they offer. The leadership conferences and classes, you just don’t get everywhere. You have to do it.* – Ruben
Chapter Five

Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary

This poster was created to participate in the 2014 MANRRS National Conference and the purpose of the study done for the poster was to interpret the experiences and perceptions of Hispanic students enrolled in secondary agriculture programs. The study is geared towards Agricultural teachers, so that they can better understand the Hispanic student population in hopes of increasing their participation above the local level.

Recommendations

The poster was effective in presenting the study’s main points and theory, but they judges of the competition recommended the following (a) Include pictures on the poster that pertain to the finding, this will help viewers better understand the findings and (b) thoroughly examine the poster for any punctuation mistakes.

The study’s findings and results can be very useful for teachers attempting to motivate their students, but the researcher’s recommendations include:(a) Agriculture teachers must make an honest and meaningful effort to form connections with students and families. This can be done through home visits, which is when an agriculture advisor sets an appointment with the student’s parents or guardians, to talk about the student and the opportunities that the agriculture has to offer; it is also an opportunity to get the student to begin thinking about career goals and plans after high school, (b) Agriculture programs should set up mentoring programs in order to connect older members with newer members. This can help students form personal connections.
with other students in their chapter and form the family-like environment Hispanic students are accustomed to. (c) Cultural literacy should be infused into future agricultural teachers curriculum in their respected universities. This can help future agricultural teachers understand the different cultures that at some point will be present in their classroom, and (d) Perform additional research on actively participating Hispanic students in predominantly Caucasian FFA chapters.

If the recommendations to this study are followed this can lead to more Hispanic students realizing the FFA mission of leadership, personal growth, and career success. As the Hispanic population continues to grow, so will the amount of Hispanic students in public schools. If the agricultural education community fails to acknowledge this group of students, their participation and program growth will be denied.

Conclusions

The study and the poster were an overall success. Although this projected was focused on agricultural education, it can also be implemented into core classrooms. Our goal in Chapter One was to determine the student participant’s driving force (motivation) to participate beyond the local level in an agricultural program. The research and poster combined helped the team find the motivation of student’s and present it to an informed group.
References


http://www.[state]aged.org/content/statistics


Appendices

Appendix A
Poster presented at national conference of Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences 2014.