

Employer's Perceptions of Agribusiness Placement  
SOE Programs

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Educators have long recognized supervised occupational experience (SOE) as a means of providing students with practical experiences in agriculture. Traditionally, vocational agriculture (vo-ag) students have completed production agriculture projects or have been placed on farms to gain occupational experience. By 1966, some states were expanding the concept of supervised occupational experience. In a document published by the Department of Agricultural Education (1966) at Montana State University emphasis was placed on:

The . . . need for training experience in off-farm agricultural occupations as expressed in the Vocational Education Act of 1963 has resulted in the extension of the placement-for-experience phase of the program to include the placement of students in agricultural businesses and industries. (p. 23)

SOE is a teaching-learning method that is considered an integral part of the vocational agriculture program. SOE provides students with practical learning in real-life work settings. It promotes the educational development of each student through actual job experiences on a farm or in an off-farm agricultural business. SOE programs that include placement for part-time employment in an agribusiness provides students with practical training in varied types of businesses.

Phipps (1980) emphasized the need for a broad experience program:

A supervised occupational experience program should be of sufficient scope and should be conducted in such a way as to make it practical, interesting, challenging, and educational. (p. 218)

Supervised Occupational Experience was defined in a publication of the National FFA foundation (Supervised Occupational Experience Handbook, 1982):

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Supervised Occupational Experience consists of all the planned practical activities conducted outside of scheduled class time in which the student develops and applies agricultural knowledge and skills. Students in SOE are supervised by teachers, parents, employers or adults who assist them in achieving their educational objectives. The competencies to be developed should be determined cooperatively by the student, teacher, parents and employer. (p. 3)

Phipps (1980) identified the parties involved when he defined SOE as activities of educational value conducted by students outside of class in which teachers, employers, and parents provide instruction and supervision. When students are placed in agribusiness and on farms for employment experiences, the employer becomes a vital contributor to the educational process. Therefore, involvement of employers is essential to the success of SOE programs that involve placement for employment experience.

### Purpose and Objectives

The problem of this research (Fletcher, 1983) was to determine the benefits derived from agribusiness SOE and to identify factors important in planning and/or conducting students' agribusiness employment experiences as perceived by employers of vocational agriculture students. More specifically, the objectives of the study were to:

1. Identify the benefits students derive for agribusiness placement SOE as perceived by employers.
2. Identify factors employers perceive as important in planning and/or conducting agribusiness placement SOE programs.
3. Determine if significant differences exist among employers on perceived benefits students receive from agribusiness placement SOE and on factors viewed as important in planning and/or conducting agribusiness employment experiences for vocational agriculture students when grouped according to type of business and person primarily responsible for supervision.

### Procedures

The population for this study consisted of agribusiness SOE employers of high school junior and senior students who were enrolled in selected Iowa vocational agriculture departments and who participated in agribusiness placement SOE programs during the fall of the 1981-82 school year. The selected Iowa vocational agriculture departments were chosen on the basis of schools having a total of at

least six junior and/or senior students participating in an agribusiness placement SOE program. Students were chosen after teachers agreed to administer the student instrument as a part of the regular classroom curriculum. Teachers of the 22 schools meeting the stated population criterion were contacted by letter and instructed to give on a response form the initials of every odd numbered junior and/or senior student on the class roster who was participating in an agribusiness placement SOE program. This procedure produced a sampling of 150 students. A companion study (Pilgrim, 1983) collected data from these students. The information collected included the names, addresses, and phone numbers of the businesses where the students were employed. Students who were employed on farms and students who did not supply complete information about their employment were excluded from the study. As a result, the sample for this study included 56 non-farm agribusiness employers identified by the participating students. These employers were mailed questionnaires and asked to participate in the study. They were instructed to ask the person primarily responsible for the supervision of the part-time vocational agriculture student(s) to complete the questionnaire.

The questionnaire used in this descriptive survey consisted of three parts. Part I asked employers to indicate on a nine-point scale the contribution they perceived that students' agribusiness SOE made to skill development (1 = no contribution, 5 = average contribution, and 9 = great contribution). Part II of the questionnaire asked employers to indicate on a nine-point scale how important selected factors were in planning and conducting students' agribusiness employment in SOE (1 = no importance, 5 = average importance, and 9 = great importance). The 35 occupational abilities included in Part I and 17 selected factors in Part II were drawn from a review of literature. Part III asked employers to provide specific information about their company and their involvement with agribusiness SOE programs. The instrument items were reviewed for clarity and appropriateness by faculty and graduate students in the Department of Agricultural Education at Iowa State University. Suggestions made were incorporated into the final instrument. The reliability coefficients (Guttman's split half procedure) ranged from .80 to .87 for the scales.

After the initial mailing and two follow-up mailings 31 (55.4%) of the instruments had been returned, but only 29 (51.8%) were properly completed and usable. Since the percentage of returns was somewhat low, 9 (16.1%) of the non-respondents were randomly selected for further study. Each employer was telephoned and asked to respond to three randomly selected abilities from Part I and two randomly selected factors from Part II of the instrument. The t-test was utilized to determine if significant differences existed between the responses of the respondents and non-respondents. No significant differences were found at the .05 level; therefore, it was concluded that observations of the respondents could be generalized to the population of employers.

## Results

It was observed that the four most common functions of the agribusiness serving as experience sites were: agriculture equipment sales and service (25.0%), agriculture supplies (25.0%), veterinary service (17.9%), and processing and distribution (17.9%). Almost 75% of the companies employed 10 or less full-time employees. A majority (68.5%) had employed only one or two students over a two year period. More than half (57.7%) of the students were supervised by the manager or owner-manager of the business while the remainder (42.3%) were supervised by a foreman or department supervisor.

### Development of Occupational Abilities

Employers were asked to rate the contribution of agribusiness employment experiences in developing 35 selected abilities in students. As shown in Table 1, 29 abilities were rated above average, indicating that the employers perceived agribusiness employment experiences as contributing to the development of occupational abilities. The five abilities rated highest were: (a) learn from the experience of others, (b) use equipment in an agribusiness job, (c) use time efficiently, (d) identify skills needed in agribusiness jobs, and (e) establish and maintain businesslike relationships with others.

The businesses were divided into two groups, those providing services only (n=8) and those providing both sales and services (n=20). Using the *t*-test, only four significant differences for the 35 rated abilities were found between the groups at the .05 level. These four abilities were: (a) establish a set of values to guide their actions, (b) participate in the planning of their own activities, (c) use time efficiently, and (d) recognize and solve problems in an agribusiness job. In all four cases, the mean was higher for the sales and services businesses than for the service only businesses.

The businesses were also divided into the groups based on the position of the person primarily responsible for supervising the work of the part-time students. Supervision by the manager or owner-manager constituted one group (n=15) and the foreman or department supervisor, the second (n=11). Using the *t*-test, significant differences at the .05 level were observed for three abilities. These were: (a) read and understand agricultural information, (b) identify how agribusinesses are financed, and (c) use animal science information in an agribusiness job. All three of these abilities were rated significantly higher by the managers or owner-managers.

### Factors in Planning and Conducting Agribusiness Placement SOE

Employers were asked to rate the importance of specific factors in planning and conducting vocational agriculture students' agribusi-

Table 1

*Contribution of Agribusiness Employment Experiences in Developing Occupational Abilities in Students as Perceived by Employers*

Abilities	$\bar{X}$	SD
Use equipment in an agribusiness job	7.21	1.29
Learn from the experience of others	7.14	1.38
Use time efficiently	6.86	1.38
Recognize that agricultural practices are changing	6.86	1.98
Establish and maintain businesslike relationships with others	6.83	1.34
Identify skills needed in agribusiness jobs	6.83	1.81
Follow business policies and procedures	6.66	1.59
Maintain and use records and reports	6.57	1.83
Recognize their skills and interests in making employment plans	6.52	1.01
Follow written directions and rules	6.48	1.64
Recognize and solve problems in an agribusiness job	6.39	1.50
Maintain customer relations	6.36	2.15
Provide supplies or services to farmers	6.36	1.79
Apply and interview for a job	6.32	1.59
Recognize employment opportunities in agriculture	6.28	1.53
Participate in the planning of their own activities	6.28	1.81
Participate in activities and programs that improve agriculture	6.18	1.81
Determine opportunities for self-employment	6.14	1.63
Use information about occupations in making employment plans	6.14	1.43
Establish a set of values to guide their actions	6.10	1.57
Read and understand agricultural information	6.07	2.02
Earn extra money to stay in school	6.03	2.03
Identify and use new practices in agriculture	6.00	1.87
Use math skills in an agribusiness job	5.90	1.66
Earn extra money to help in family	5.86	2.26
Handle and process farm products	5.61	2.27
Explain the role of agriculture in our nation	5.10	1.86
Express ideas clearly when speaking	5.03	1.61
Use plant and soil science information in an agribusiness job	5.00	2.36
Identify how agribusinesses are financed	4.86	2.07
Use animal science information in an agribusiness job	4.82	2.47
Use services of agencies and organizations in securing a job	4.69	1.71
Manage an agribusiness	4.68	2.25
Express ideas clearly when writing	4.55	1.99
Participate in activities and programs that improve the community	4.52	1.77

Note. Abilities are listed in rank order based on mean ratings.

ness employment experiences. Data in Table 2 reveal how employers rated the 16 factors. Fourteen of the 16 factors were rated above average in importance indicating that employers perceived these factors as important in planning and conducting agribusiness employment experience. The following five factors had the highest mean ratings: (a) the people in the agribusiness where students work, (b) students' parent(s) or guardian(s), (c) the agricultural experiences students had before starting their agribusiness employment, (d) the individualized coordination-teaching efforts by the vocational agriculture teacher, and (e) the evaluation of students' agribusiness experiences carried out by themselves, their vocational agriculture teacher(s), the employer, or others.

A t-test was utilized to determine if significant differences existed between the ratings of service only businesses and sales and service businesses. Three differences were observed at the .05 level. The factors were: (a) the individualized coordination-teaching by the vocational agriculture teacher, (b) the supervisory visits made by the vocational agriculture teacher(s) to the agribusiness where students work, and (c) the records students kept on their agribusiness experiences. In each case, the mean was higher for the sales and service businesses than for the service only businesses.

The responses of employers were divided into the groups according to the position of the person primarily responsible for supervising the work of part-time vocational agriculture students. Supervision by the manager or owner-manager was one group (n=15) and the foreman or department supervisor was the second group (n=11). The results of the t-tests indicated that there was only one significant difference at the .05 level: foreman or department supervisors rated "the supervisory visits made by the vocational agriculture teacher(s) to the agribusiness where students work" significantly higher than managers or owner-managers.

### Recommendations

The findings of this research revealed that employers perceived agribusiness employment experience as being valuable to students. The employers also rated a number of factors as being important in planning and conducting agribusiness employment experiences. The following recommendations are made to personnel responsible for administering and coordinating local vocational agriculture programs and agribusiness placement SOE programs.

1. Employers believe agribusiness employment experience assists students in developing a variety of employment related abilities. Vocational agriculture teachers should make students, parents, and other interested persons aware of the benefits of agribusiness placement SOE.

Table 2

*Importance of Factors in Planning and Conducting Vocational Agriculture Students' Agribusiness employment experiences*

Factors	$\bar{X}$	SD
The people in the agribusiness where students work	7.54	1.14
Students' parent(s) or guardian(s)	6.62	1.52
The agriculture experiences students had before starting their agribusiness employment	6.61	1.60
The individualized (one-to-one) coordination-teaching efforts by the vocational agriculture teacher	6.55	2.05
The evaluations of students' agribusiness experiences carried out by themselves, their teachers, employers, or others	6.36	1.97
High school classes (excluding vocational agriculture)	6.35	1.34
FFA chapter activities	6.24	1.92
The goals established for students' agribusiness experiences	6.21	1.32
Vocational agriculture classes	5.93	1.75
The training or experience plan(s) developed for the students' agribusiness experiences	5.90	1.54
The rules of the vo-ag department for agribusiness experiences	5.86	1.53
Fellow vocational agriculture students	5.68	1.57
Agreement(s) developed for students' agribusiness experiences	5.48	1.60
The supervisory visits made by the vo-ag teachers to the agribusiness where students work	5.00	2.36
The records students kept on their agribusiness experiences	4.89	2.17
Wages earned by students from their agribusiness experiences	4.89	1.81

Note. Factors are listed in rank order based on mean ratings.

2. Once an agribusiness employer indicates a willingness to serve as a cooperating employer for an agribusiness placement SOE program, the vocational agriculture teacher should provide information about the role the employer plays in the education of the student.
3. When planning the vocational agriculture curriculum, teachers should be aware of the occupational abilities that may be developed through agribusiness placement SOE.

4. Employers rated 14 factors as being of average to above average in importance in planning and conducting agribusiness employment experiences. Teachers and other curriculum planners can use this list of important factors to help insure quality agribusiness placement SOE programs.
5. One of the important factors as perceived by employers was the individualized coordination-teaching efforts of teachers. On-site instruction and advice by the teacher should be provided on a systematic basis.

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