

**Factors Associated With the SOEP and Career Objectives of the
1984 Regional and National Proficiency Award Winners**

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Proficiency awards have been used for many years as a means of recognizing vocational agriculture students who have developed outstanding supervised occupational experience programs (SOEPs). These awards, administered through the Future Farmers of America, are given at various levels extending from the chapter or local level through the national level. The National FFA Organization lists three purposes for proficiency awards: "(1) to stimulate interest in the instructional program; (2) to stimulate interest in agricultural occupations; (3) to reward members on the local, state, regional and national levels for exceptional accomplishments in progressing toward specific occupational objectives in agriculture" (FFA, 1985, p. 10).

The Official Manual of the Future Farmers of America (1983) stated that the proficiency awards are to be based primarily on the student's individual SOEP and career objective. The proficiency award should then be the culmination of the development of high quality SOEPs. Agricultural educators such as Vaughn (1977) have expressed the opinion that contests and awards should be closely related to classroom instruction. Cross (1981) expressed the concern that "we must make the FFA more relevant to classroom instruction."

Assuming that the proficiency awards do represent the best of the SOEPs, a study was needed to determine how closely the proficiency awards were associated with instruction in the local vocational agriculture program (Seefeldt, 1984).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to answer the following questions:

1. How instrumental were the vocational agriculture teachers and the vocational agriculture programs in establishing the proficiency award winners' SOEPs?
2. Were the winners employed in the area of their proficiency award?
3. Did the winners change occupational objectives while they were in vocational agriculture and, if so, when?
4. What factors were most influential in the decision to change occupational objectives?
5. What people were the most influential in encouraging the winners to do a good job with their SOEPs?
6. What were the winners' perceptions regarding: (a) the value of their SOEP; (b) the value of the vocational agriculture program in developing the SOEP; and (c) the reasons for choosing their particular SOEP?

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7. Were there differences in the responses of those winners in areas dealing with agribusiness and those dealing with production agriculture?

Methodology

To obtain data for the study, an instrument was developed by the researcher and validated by a ten-member panel of experts. The instrument was field tested and checked for reliability using both high school vocational agriculture students and undergraduate students majoring in agricultural education.

The population consisted of the eighty-eight vocational agriculture students who were declared the 1984 regional and national FFA proficiency award winners. An initial mailing and two follow-up mailings yielded a return rate of 89%.

The data were analyzed using frequencies, means, and t-tests. Data for the group as a whole were analyzed; the group was then categorized into two subgroups according to the proficiency award area. One group consisted of those areas involved with production agriculture and included: Beef Production, Crop Production, Dairy Production, Diversified Livestock, Floriculture, Forestry Management, Fruit and/or Vegetable Production, Horse Production, Poultry Production, Soil and Water Management, and Swine Production. The other group consisted of those areas concerned with agribusiness. These included: Agricultural Electrification, Agricultural Mechanics, Agricultural Processing, Agricultural Sales and/or Service, Nursery Operation, Placement in Agricultural Production, and Turf and Landscape Management. Outdoor Recreation, Fish and Wildlife Management, and Home Improvement were not considered to fit either group and were not included in the subgroups.

Findings

Question 1: How instrumental were the vocational agriculture teachers and the vocational agriculture programs in establishing the proficiency award winners' SOEPs?

The mean (5.33) and range (0-35) of the number of visits made by the vocational agriculture teacher to the students during their last year in school and also the mean (17.83) and the range (0-100) of the total number of visits made while the students were in vocational agriculture are indicated in Table 1.

The winners were asked if they were now conducting an agricultural business or operation (raise livestock, raise crops, own a nursery, own a repair shop, etc.). As indicated in Table 2, 89.7% of the entire group, 97.5% of the production agriculture group and 88.0% of the agribusiness group responded that they were now conducting an agricultural business or operation. They were then asked two follow-up questions: "Were you conducting this business or operation before you started taking vocational agriculture?" and "If you had not enrolled in vocational agriculture, would you now be conducting this business or operation?" Of those conducting agricultural operations or businesses, 70% of the entire group, 80% of the production agriculture group and 36.0% of the agribusiness group were conducting the operation before they began taking vocational agriculture. As indicated by the data in Table 2, 70.0% of the entire group who were conducting an operation (80.0% of the production group and 45.8% of the agribusiness group) responded that they would be conducting the operation if they had not enrolled in vocational agriculture.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations and Ranges of SOEP Visits by Vo-Ag Teachers

	Entire Group			Prod. Ag. Group			Ag. Bus. Group		
	Mean	S.D.	Range	Mean	S.D.	Range	Mean	S.D.	Range
SOEP Visits Last Year	5.33	5.77	0-35	6.25	7.15	0-35	4.48	4.22	0-15
Visits During High School Years	17.83	16.56	0-100	16.42	20.08	0-100	21.22	12.80	3-35

Table 2

Percentages of Proficiency Award Winners Conducting Ag. Operation

	Entire Group %	Prod. Ag. Group %	Ag. Bus. Group %
Conducting ag. operations or business	89.7	97.5	88.0
Of those conducting ag. operations or business:			
Conducted operations before vo-ag	70.0	80.0	36.0
Would still be operating if not enrolled in vo-ag	70.0	80.0	45.8

Question 2: What people were the most influential in encouraging the winners to do a good job with their SOEPs?

As indicated in Table 3, the winners rated their parents as being the most influential and their vocational agriculture teacher as the second most influential in encouraging them to do a good job with their SOEP. Those contributing least were the school guidance counselors and other students who were not in vocational agriculture. The only sources of influence found to be significantly different between the two groups were the vocational agriculture teacher and the school guidance counselor, both being rated higher by the agribusiness group.

Question 3: Are the winners employed in the area of their proficiency group?

On the questionnaire, the winners were asked if they were employed (either part- or full-time). They were also asked to describe what they

did on the job. The data generated by these questions are illustrated in Table 4. The data revealed that 79.5% of the entire group were employed. Of those employed, 59% were employed in the area of their proficiency award.

Table 3

Mean Degree of Influence of Different Individuals in Encouraging Proficiency Award Winners to Do a Good Job with SOEP

Individuals	Entire Group n = 78	Production Agriculture n = 42	Agribusiness n = 25	t-Value
Parents	4.66	4.83	4.67	1.19
Brother or sister	3.03	3.37	2.77	1.14
Another relative	3.25	3.28	3.00	0.68
Vocational agriculture teacher	4.38	4.24	4.79	-2.21*
Other student(s) not in vo-ag	2.53	2.47	2.34	
Other student(s) in vo-ag	3.18	3.31	3.17	0.37
School guidance counselor	2.23	1.87	2.74	-2.29*
People graduated from vo-ag	3.54	3.64	3.54	0.27
Neighbors or friends	3.53	3.69	3.17	1.58
Farmers or agribusiness people in the area	3.78	3.83	3.83	-0.01

Note. 1 = not influential; 2 = little influence; 3 = undecided; 4 = somewhat influential; 5 = extremely influential.

*Significant at 0.05 level.

Table 4

Percentages of Proficiency Award Winners With Certain Employment Characteristics

Characteristic	Entire Group % n = 78	Prod. Ag. Group % n = 42	Ag. Bus. Group % n = 25
Employed at least part time	79.5	83.3	76.0
Employed in area of proficiency award	59.0*	57.1*	100.0*
Enrolled in college	56.4	57.1	52.0

*Percent of those employed.

Question 4: Did the winners' occupational objective change while they were in vocational agriculture and, if so, when?

In the entire group, 39 (50%) responded that they had changed their occupational objective since they were first enrolled in vocational agriculture (Table 5). The most common time listed was the junior year with the senior year second. The least common time was the freshman year. There were no substantial differences between the responses of the subgroups.

Question 5: What factors were most influential in the decision to change occupational objectives?

The factor most often used was "my interests changed" (Table 5). The second most popular response was "experiences with my SOEP." The least used responses were "advice of the guidance counselor" and "advice of my vocational agriculture teacher." Responses for the subgroups reflected the total about equally.

Table 5

Number of Proficiency Award Winners Who Changed Occupational Objective, Year of Change and Reasons for Change

	Entire Group n = 78	Prod. Ag. Group n = 42	Ag. Bus. Group n = 25
Number changing occupational objectives while enrolled in vo-ag	38	17	6
Year occupational objective changed:			
Freshman	3	0	1
Sophomore	6	1	1
Junior	10	4	1
Senior	9	7	2
After graduation	8	2	1
No response	3	3	-
Reason for change:			
Experiences with SOEP	10	4	2
Advice of parents	5	3	1
Advice of guidance counselor	0	0	0
Advice of vo-ag teacher	2	1	0
My interests changed	15	6	1
Other	7	3	0
No response	0	0	2

Question 6: What were the winners' perceptions regarding: (a) the value of their SOEP; (b) the value of the vocational agriculture program in developing the SOEP; and (c) the reasons for choosing their particular SOEP?

The winners were asked to give their response to several statements in terms of a five-point graduated scale. The questions were designed to obtain data to answer each of the three parts of the question.

In Table 6, Statements 1 and 2 dealt with the winners' perceived value of the proficiency award program and SOEPs. Statement 1 "Students in class were motivated to do a better job on their SOEP because of the proficiency award program" received a 3.72 mean response from the entire group. Statement 2 "SOEP provided valuable job skills" received a 4.73 mean response from the entire group.

Statements 3 through 9 dealt with the perceived value of the assistance of the vocational agriculture teacher in conducting the SOEP. The mean response for Statement 3 "I couldn't have carried out my SOEP if it weren't for my vocational agriculture teacher" was 3.73 for the entire group. Statement 4 "Instructor visited as often as needed" received a mean response of 4.20. The statement dealing with the teacher's knowledge (No. 5) was rated 4.05. Statement 6 "My vo-ag program adequately prepared me for an agriculturally related occupation . . ." received a mean rating of 4.03. Statement 7, which dealt with the teacher's knowledge and help in technical and managerial decisions, received a mean rating of 3.76. Statement 8 "My vo-ag teacher spent an adequate amount of time in class teaching classes about my proficiency award area" received a mean response of 3.55. Statement 9 "Most of the improvements in my SOEP were due to the advice received from my vo-ag teacher" was given a mean rating of 3.05.

Statements 10 through 13 dealt with the perceived reasons for choosing their particular SOEP. The statements receiving the highest mean rating were: (a) Statement 10 "I chose my SOEP because it was the type of job I wanted to do when I graduate" (a mean rating of 3.99) (b) Statement 12 ". . . a strong interest in the area" (a mean rating of 3.83); and (c) Statement 11 ". . . the resources were already there" (a mean rating of 3.78).

To answer research question 7, a t-test was conducted using the data obtained from the 13 questions. The only item that indicated a significant difference between the two subgroups was Statement 10 which dealt with the winners' reason for choosing their particular SOEP. The production agriculture group was more likely to agree with the statement "I chose my SOEP because it was the type of job I want to do when I graduate."

Conclusions

The vocational agriculture teachers and the vocational agriculture programs appear to have been instrumental in instigating less than half of the winners' SOEPs. Most were already engaged in the operation before they began taking vocational agriculture and felt that they would still be conducting the operation if they had not enrolled in vocational agriculture. Although the winners felt they were visited often enough, they were undecided as to whether the improvements in their SOEP were due to the advice of their teachers. It is interesting to note that some of the winners responded that they had never been visited by their vocational agriculture teacher. Given this evidence, it appears that not all of the SOEPs were an outgrowth of the vocational agriculture program.

Over three-fourths of the winners were employed with well over half of the whole group employed in the area of their proficiency award. All but two of the group were either employed or enrolled in a college or university. Although a slightly higher percentage of the agricultural

Table 6
Mean Responses of Students to Statements Concerning Their SOEP

	<u>Entire Group</u>		<u>Prod. Ag. Group</u>		<u>Ag. Bus. Group</u>		t-Value
	\bar{X}	S.D.	\bar{X}	S.D.	\bar{X}	S.D.	
1. Students in my class were motivated to do a better job on their SOEP because of the Proficiency Award program.	3.72	0.92	3.83	0.92	3.68	0.75	0.68
2. Through my SOEP, I have learned valuable skills that will help me in securing and succeeding on a job.	4.73	0.47	4.77	0.42	4.72	0.46	0.49
3. I could not have carried out my SOEP if it weren't for my vocational agriculture teacher.	3.73	1.30	3.65	1.41	3.96	1.06	-0.95
4. My instructor visited with me as often as he or she was needed.	4.20	1.10	4.22	1.08	4.08	1.15	0.50
5. My vocational agriculture teacher was very knowledgeable about my SOEP.	4.05	1.14	4.00	1.15	4.20	1.12	-0.69
6. My vocational agriculture program adequately prepared me for employment in an agriculturally related occupation.	4.03	0.97	4.10	0.96	3.92	1.04	0.71

(table continues)

	<u>Entire Group</u>		<u>Prod. Ag. Group</u>		<u>Ag. Bus. Group</u>		t-Value
	\bar{X}	S.D.	\bar{X}	S.D.	\bar{X}	S.D.	
7. My vocational agriculture teacher was very knowledgeable and helpful in providing assistance with technical and managerial decisions regarding my SOEP.	3.76	1.14	3.72	1.09	3.92	1.15	-0.69
8. My vocational teacher spent an adequate amount of time in class teaching classes about my proficiency award area.	3.55	1.21	3.73	1.10	3.28	1.31	1.15
9. Most of the improvements in my SOEP were due to the advice received from my vocational agriculture teacher.	3.05	1.17	2.90	1.10	3.32	1.14	-1.47
10. I chose my SOEP because it was the type of job I want to do when I graduate.	3.99	1.08	4.30	.91	3.64	1.07	2.65*
11. I chose my SOEP because the resources for the program were already there (for example, family owned livestock, ag. business, etc.).	3.78	1.31	4.02	1.19	3.54	1.35	1.50
12. I chose my SOEP, not necessarily because I wanted a job in that area, but because I just had a strong interest in that area.	3.83	1.21	3.90	1.32	3.56	1.08	1.08
13. I chose my SOEP because of encouragement by neighbors or friends.	2.55	1.24	2.61	1.16	2.50	1.39	0.30

Note. 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = undecided; 3 = agree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree.

*Significant at 0.01 level.

production group were employed, all of those in the agribusiness groups who were employed were working in the area of their proficiency award.

About half of the winners changed their occupational objectives while they were enrolled in vocational agriculture. It appears that the winners who changed occupational objectives tended to do so during their junior or senior year.

The winners' SOEP appears to have had an influence on the change of occupational objectives. Since the most common reasons listed for changing their occupational objective were "my interests changed" and "experiences with my SOEP," it is highly likely that the experiences with the SOEP had a direct influence on the winners' change of interest. The winners tended to agree that the SOEP helped them gain valuable employment skills.

The winners' parents and vocational agriculture teachers were the most influential in encouraging them to do a good job with their SOEP.

The winners perceived their SOEP as being valuable in securing and succeeding on the job. As a group, the winners were undecided as to whether or not the improvements in their SOEP were due to the advice of their vocational agriculture teacher. Over one-third of the winners felt that the improvements were not due to the advice of the vocational agriculture teacher. The reason for choosing a particular SOEP was "occupational objectives, interest in a particular area and home resources."

The winners in the agribusiness group were visited more often by their vocational agriculture teachers, were influenced less by their vocational agriculture teachers and influenced more by the school guidance counselor, were more likely to be employed in the area of their proficiency award, and were more likely to have begun their agricultural operation after they began their vocational agriculture program. The winners in the production agriculture group were more likely to have chosen their SOEP because of the type of job they wanted when they graduated. It appears that although the agribusiness group winners were influenced slightly less by the vocational agriculture teachers, the vocational agriculture program had more impact on them than on their production agriculture counterparts.

Implications

1. Perhaps the criteria for winning a proficiency award should be reexamined. Are the awards based on the scope of the students' SOEP or the progress the student has made through his/her vocational agriculture program?

2. As award applications are examined, maybe consideration should be given to the involvement of the vocational agriculture teachers. Does a student have a true SOEP if he/she has never been visited by his/her vocational agriculture teacher?

3. Teachers of vocational agriculture should work closely with parents in encouraging quality SOEPs.

4. SOEPs should continue to be emphasized as providing needed job skills.

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