Benefits, Barriers, and Implementation Strategies Experienced by Teachers Adopting FFA Affiliation Membership: A Case Study.

Abstract

Although FFA affiliation has been piloted and in practice for several years, there is limited formal research on the program and strategies for best practice. We used a descriptive case study design to examine and describe the experiences of nine teachers in three states who had expertise related to FFA affiliation. We conducted semi-structured interviews to uncover the benefits and challenges those teachers experienced while adopting the innovation of affiliation. We analyzed our data using open, deductive and inductive coding to determine common themes of advantages, strategies for compatibility, and continuing challenges when adopting the innovation. Participants in our study shared how affiliation made life easier and improved the participation of their students, but changed how their students think about membership (i.e., choosing to join vs. part of the class), how they graded social-emotional learning and FFA, and how they interacted with administration and partner groups. Continued adoption of the innovation of FFA affiliation may present financial challenges and problems finding opportunities for all students, which has notable implications for School-Based Agricultural Education and the National FFA Organization, specifically the elimination of dues, as FFA works toward its goal of 100% membership by 2028.

Keywords: FFA affiliation; student membership dues; three-component model of school-based agricultural education; mandatory student organization membership programs.

Introduction

Instruction in agriculture has long followed a singular, uniform model. School-Based Agricultural Education (SBAE) in the United States began as early as 1858 but was systematically established nationwide with the passage of the federal Smith-Hughes Act in 1917 (Croom, 2008). Smith-Hughes created a context for SBAE to exist within, and established a foundation for the first two components of what is now commonly known as the three-component model: formal classroom-based instruction in agriculture and hands-on, realistic experiences in agriculture (i.e., Supervised Agricultural Experience; SAE). The National FFA Organization (i.e., FFA) formed the third component of the model, founded in 1928 to teach students leadership and social-emotional learning skills. Congress formalized FFA's role as the third piece of the model when it granted FFA a federal charter and passed Public Law 81-740 (Case, 2010a). The SBAE three-component model is a comprehensive and complete model of instruction, addressing all three domains of learning (i.e., cognitive: classroom, affective: FFA, and psychomotor: SAE; Bloom, 1956; Krathwohl et al., 1964; Simpson, 1972). One hundred years later, teachers and students alike in SBAE widely recognize the three-component model.

The problem worth exploring is not a question of whether educators are aware of the model or support it, but whether they practice it. SBAE programs exist that do not offer FFA or SAE to all students, and some that do not implement either program at all (Sheehan, 2021). It could be argued that if SBAE educators were following the intent of the Smith-Hughes Act and federal FFA charter for an integrated three-component model, then all students enrolled in an SBAE course would have an SAE project and be involved in FFA. However, of the more than 1.2 million SBAE students, only 700,000 students are in FFA, and even fewer students have SAE projects at just 54%

(Sheehan, 2021). There is an apparent disparity between what SBAE educators philosophically advocate as correct SBAE, and how they pragmatically practice it.

In past decades there has been a renewed national effort to address the difference between the idea of the three-component model and its implementation. As early as 2005, the National FFA Board of Directors began to explore alternative membership models to decrease the gap between students in SBAE courses and students who are members of FFA (Case, 2010b). After years of discussion and a yearlong pilot including more than 200 chapters in 2009-2010, the board voted to approve a new model of membership known as FFA affiliation (Sheehan & Moore, 2019). The affiliation program eliminated dues and provided each student enrolled in an SBAE course the opportunities for FFA and leadership development (Case, 2010b). The board cited its rationale for approving the new model as no longer needing to persuade students to join, elimination of dues, repositioning FFA as an integral part of SBAE and engaging every student in the three-circle model during all classes (Case, 2010b). Under the affiliation model, chapters no longer collect dues from students; instead, the program pays an "instructional fee" based on enrollment (Case, 2010c). Together, these small changes reposition FFA as integral within SBAE and shift how a chapter operates, but they also present unfamiliar challenges.

The challenges of recruiting new FFA members and retaining participation are likely as old as the organization itself, but the experiences of those adopting the affiliation model are something new. The FFA affiliation program has been piloted and in practice nationally for several years, and in some states for decades (Sheehan & Moore, 2019). The model might not appear to be new or innovative; however, it has not yet reached widespread acceptance or adoption within the SBAE profession, and there is very limited research and literature available.

Review of Literature

Literature specific to FFA affiliation membership is limited, though research on the various rationale of the National FFA Organization for approving the affiliation innovation can lend insight into the various barriers and strategies around its adoption.

Persuasion of Students to Join: Recruitment and the Enrollment/Membership Gap

There may never have been a time when 100% of SBAE students were FFA members. As early as 1959 as many as 25% of SBAE students chose not to join FFA, a divide in participation that grew as large as 55% in 2004 (Hoover & Scanlon, 1991; Stagg & Staller, 1999; Talbert et al., 2006). The National FFA Organization reported in 2016 that of the 1,030,000 students enrolled in SBAE programs in the United States, only 649,355 (i.e., 63%) were FFA members (Carter). But why students join an organization, or choose not to join, often varies.

The image and value of FFA play a powerful role in the decision to join. Students are likely to join an organization if it meets their need for self-esteem (Croom & Flowers, 2001; Marshall et al., 1990). People renew their membership if, at minimum, they view the value they receive to be greater than the costs, especially financial costs (Sirkin & McDermott, 1995). Specially related to FFA, students join to help fulfill career goals, gain leadership skills, and because they enjoy the organization, while those who do not are uninterested, have other commitments, or cannot find time (Gliem & Gliem, 2000; Lass, 1989; Rossetti et al., 1996; Scanlon et al., 1989). Students not knowing enough about FFA, and its benefits, is often another reason to not join (Talbert & Balschweid, 2004). Students will not join FFA if they feel it does not represent them, does not have value, or they are unaware of the opportunities it affords them.

Note that enrollment in an agriculture course is a prerequisite to join FFA, and the image of agriculture itself impacts the decision to join. Agriculture, with its historical roots in slavery, can be an unattractive career pathway for students of color and those who were historically oppressed by those systems. The perception of the local SBAE program, its FFA chapter, and the industry and profession of agriculture are some of the greatest barriers for students enrolling in SBAE courses and participating in FFA (Hoover & Scanlon, 1991; Martin & Kitchel, 2014). Historically marginalized students are significantly underrepresented in SBAE and FFA compared to secondary education overall (Talbert & Larke, 1995). Since the National FFA Organization absorbed the New Farmers of America (i.e., the "separate, but equal" organization for boys of color) during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, both the percentage of African American students that make up the total membership of the organization and the actual number of students of color, have decreased, even while overall membership has grown (National FFA Organization, 2022; Talbert & Larke, 1995; Wakefield & Talbert, 1999). The lack of diversity and the historical exclusion of specific groups may play a role in the persuasion of students to join. Non-members of color have often felt that FFA was not for students who are not White, and that they did not feel welcome or see any future value in the organization (Connors et al., 1990; Gliem & Gliem, 2000; Hoover & Scanlon, 1991). While there is little evidence of meaningful progress on diversifying SBAE and FFA (LaVergne et al., 2011), the positive results of diversity interventions suggest it is possible for underrepresented populations to be recruited and involved more in education through specific efforts to change a program's culture (Jones, 1998). One of the efforts to yield positive results is programs that engage all students in FFA (i.e., 100% involvement/membership; Roberts et al., 2009; Talbert & Balschweid, 2004). Closing the gap between SBAE and FFA involves both the perception of FFA, but also the perception of SBAE and agriculture overall, especially as FFA membership requires enrollment in an SBAE course.

SBAE leaders and educators can also learn much about FFA recruitment by looking closely at students who are not members. Examining non-participative students within successful programs to determine what barriers prevent those students from becoming involved may be vital to making FFA and SBAE a more inclusive and just organization and program (Russell et al., 2009). Efforts to enhance the FFA component of SBAE and involve more students should be encouraged, as FFA participation and involvement are significantly related to student achievement (Cheek et al., 1994). Not addressing membership issues in FFA could result in consequences to SBAE, including "lost or reduced funding for local, state, and national FFA programs; restricted youth development opportunities offered by FFA; lower teacher salaries due to reduced responsibilities; and decreased support and maintenance of current programs" (Phelps, 2012, p. 71). There are numerous reasons why students may choose to join FFA, or not join, and eliminating membership barriers might be a useful tool for supporting student success.

Elimination of Dues and Other Barriers for Non-Participation

The choice of whether to join FFA, as an optional component of the SBAE experience, and requirement to pay dues, may also contribute to student involvement. At the adolescent age when students are afforded the opportunity to join FFA (age 11-18), students are also in a psychological period of growth and need for contact, intimacy, and belonging (Croom & Flowers, 2001; Maslow, 1970). To support inclusion and provide the benefits of leadership development and social-emotional learning to all students, SBAE teachers should engage as many students as possible in FFA (Talbert & Balschweid, 2004). SBAE educators should involve and require all students to participate in FFA, at least on a local level, not just those who choose to join (Talbert & Balschweid, 2004). Removing the barrier of needing to "opt in" for membership may instill a sense of belonging and inclusion. Rather than completing an application to join, students could choose activities of interest and simply participate. Instead of a dichotomy of members and non-members, students exist upon a spectrum of various degrees of participation. The financial cost of joining FFA may

also be a greater barrier than some realize. For 4-H, an organization similar to FFA, student concerns about participation costs negatively impact involvement (Cano & Bankston, 1992). Removing barriers like an application and dues fee is important, and several state and national efforts have succeeded with positive results.

California may be one of the earliest examples of removing FFA membership barriers. In 1983, the California Legislature created the Agricultural Incentive Grant (AIG) to support and fund the original intentions of the three-component SBAE model, including FFA and SAE (Sheehan & Moore, 2019). Policy documents for the AIG program mandate that, to ensure high quality SBAE instruction and a qualified workforce, schools in the AIG program must have appropriately credentialed SBAE instructors who engage all students in SAE/work-based learning and FFA/social-emotional learning (California Department of Education, 2016). Most importantly, within those criteria, the grant requires all students who take courses in the SBAE program be involved in FFA, receive instruction on leadership, and that teachers grade their participation in social-emotional skill development programs. The AIG essentially created FFA affiliation thirty years before the national board approved it as an option for all states.

After thirty years of success of California's model, there was a pilot study to replicate the program. The pilot conducted in 2009-2010 included Arizona, Iowa, Florida, Massachusetts, and Texas, and resulted in a membership increase at the 200 chapters involved (Case, 2010b). The pilot generated interest from chapters across the country and the national organization approved the affiliation model shortly after. In 2016, FFA released a document with perceived or potential, but not systematically investigated or researched, benefits of affiliation including: elimination of dues, saving of time, reinforcing the integral role of FFA, money not changing hands, easier to budget, simplified rosters, and meeting national standards (National FFA Organization, 2016). FFA's perceived benefits of affiliation are useful, but more research is needed to verify these predicted benefits, especially as the program has at least some correlation to membership growth.

Following the 2009 pilot, membership in the National FFA Organization has grown significantly. FFA's membership in 2009 was around 500,000, but following the implementation of the affiliation membership model, in just ten years membership grew by more than 30% to 650,000 in 2019 (Sheehan & Moore, 2019). In 2019, affiliation overtook dues as the primary model that most students participated in to receive membership, even while 70% of the 8,500 chapters continued to use the traditional dues system instead (Sheehan & Moore, 2019). In 2021, the National FFA Organization announced its goal of 100% FFA membership for all SBAE students by 2028—FFA's 100-year anniversary—yet there is still much to learn about adopting affiliation (Deimler et al., 2021). The advantages, compatibility strategies, and challenges of adopting an innovation like affiliation can provide useful insight for SBAE as educators work to fully realize the three-component model and FFA prepares for 100% membership.

Theoretical Framework

To better understand the dynamics of FFA affiliation adoption, it is useful to employ Rogers' (2010) Diffusion of Innovation theory as a theoretical framework. This theory allows for a comprehensive analysis of the adoption process, the perceived attributes of the innovation, and the factors that influence its diffusion among teachers. According to Rogers (2010, p. 12), an innovation is an "idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new." FFA affiliation fits the definition of an innovation since it represents a novel idea that has not yet reached widespread adoption or is not fully accepted within the SBAE profession. Various perceived attributes can influence the adoption of an innovation. Notably, innovations perceived to offer relative advantages over available alternatives tend to be adopted more rapidly (Rogers, 2010). The compatibility of an innovation—its ease of implementation and alignment with existing organizational values—as well

as its complexity—a user's understanding of how it works—can aid or slow adoption (Rogers, 2010). Lastly, the degree of trialability and observability play crucial roles; when individuals can observe the results of implementation and try the innovation with reduced risk, they are more inclined to adopt it with less uncertainty (Rogers, 2010).

Once an innovation reaches a critical mass of adoption, typically around 10-20% adoption, its adoption rates tend to take off and become self-sustaining (Rogers, 2010). Rogers (2010) suggested that individual perceptions of an innovation can also be shaped by implying its inevitability, desirability, or the occurrence of critical mass, although the critical mass threshold may vary depending on the specific innovation. Despite FFA affiliation being available as a national membership option since 2010 and in California as early as 1983 (California Department of Education, 2016), adoption appears to be slow. There is limited information available on the program, including adoption rates. Little is known about its relative advantages, which contributes to limited observability of the program's outcomes for decision makers. Moreover, affiliation is not easy to trial (Case, 2010b, 2010c). Consequently, some SBAE teachers may perceive that the innovation is too complex and incompatible for their programs.

Within the context of our study, we used Rogers' (2010) Diffusion of Innovation theory to frame our research objectives, who we interviewed, and what types of questions we asked. Participants represented innovators and early adopters who were able to speak about compatibility of the innovation to their program's culture, advantages over the alternative dues model, and continued challenges they face with program complexity and the limited observability of how the innovation can be best implemented. Unfortunately, there remains a lack of comprehensive information on FFA affiliation in the existing literature. Even with the perceived inevitability of 100% membership by 2028, it can be difficult for SBAE leaders and teachers to see the program's benefits and advantages over the traditional dues-based model. There is a need to further study the adoption of this innovation to assist with diffusion.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of our research study, framed by Rogers' (2010) Diffusion of Innovation theory, was to examine the impacts of FFA affiliation. We focused solely on FFA; SAE and classroom engagement were outside the scope of our study. Research questions included:

1. What are the relative advantages of affiliation and what barriers are removed (i.e., what)?
2. What cultural changes and strategies must be used to support compatibility (i.e., so what)?
3. What are the continuing challenges and barriers of affiliation, specifically continued complexity, degree of trialability, and limited observability (i.e., now what)?

This research aligned with the following research values of the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE, 2023): (a) ensuring diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, (b) increasing prosperity through innovation in AFNR systems, and (c) nurturing positive youth development through AFNR systems. Affiliation is an innovation within the youth development organization FFA, which may impact the diversity and equity of its members.

Methods

We conducted our qualitative research using a descriptive case study design. We used purposeful sampling to identify participants and semi-structured interviews to gather data. Semi-structured interviews afforded us the flexibility to uncover the benefits and challenges of adopting the innovation of FFA affiliation membership. We analyzed those data using open, deductive and inductive coding to determine common themes and constructs.

Study Design

Three types of design often comprise case study research: descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory. While exploratory case studies can be useful for creating theory and explanatory studies can test theory and answer questions about why something works the way it does, descriptive studies are useful to better define and understand the nature of a given phenomenon (Yin, 2017). We chose this approach as it helped us define a new, emerging innovation (i.e., FFA affiliation) and specify "what" schools and teachers experience during adoption, rather than "why" those experiences function the way they do. Descriptive research can also be useful for defining the context of an issue, which we can then later use to inform an explanatory or experimental study on FFA affiliation. While our findings can only be generalized to the specific participants we describe in our study, it can be invaluable as we work to define the innovation of affiliation and map the various experiences during adoption.

Participant Selection

Participants in this study were SBAE instructors considered successful in their field as an instructor and FFA advisor, but also as an established program using FFA affiliation. We used a purposeful sampling technique to identify participants who had specific experience related to FFA affiliation membership (Tongco, 2007). Three states were included in the study that met the following criteria: they represented a cross section of the United States (i.e., each state was from a different FFA region) and they had moderate success adopting affiliation membership statewide (i.e., greater than 25% voluntary program participation), but they must not be a state association with mandated statewide affiliation (i.e., 90-100% program participation).

The National FFA Organization supplied data on the number of FFA chapters in each state and the number of chapters using affiliation. We used those data to evaluate the level of adoption and implementation in each state that was not 100% affiliated, with a margin of error for discrepancy across data from different years (e.g., incomplete reporting, newly established programs, and closed programs). Based on data from National FFA, we removed the nine states that, at the time, were at or near 100% affiliation, suggesting state mandated involvement. States with low adoption were also outside the scope of our research but could be topics for future study. The following states had greater than 25% participation in affiliation membership, but less than 100%: Arizona, Delaware, Georgia, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Texas. To recruit sufficient participants for interviews, we selected Georgia (GA; southern), Iowa (IA; central), and Texas (TX; western), as they represented three states from differing geographical regions, each with sufficient voluntary affiliation membership.

We sought participant recommendations from state supervisors of SBAE—executive-level employees of the state department of education or FFA association—from the three states. We asked state supervisors, based on their expertise as state leaders and their knowledge of their own states, to recommend five to seven teachers who they self-defined as being successful with adopting the innovation of affiliation membership. We encouraged state staff to nominate teacher experts from a variety of backgrounds, including years of experience, scope in program, age, etc., as demographics were not limiting factors for the study. Staff recommended a total of 23 experts: five from GA, seven from IA, and eleven from TX. Eleven individuals, with a minimum of three per state, responded to our invitation to participate and scheduled an interview.

Data Sources

We used semi-structured interviews to collect data. Semi-structured interview formats are useful when researchers need to uncover and dive deeper into respondents' answers using "probing, open-ended questions" (Adams, 2015, p. 494). While semi-structured interviews are useful for their flexibility, an interview schedule can still be helpful to create structure and ensure consistency.

Prior to each interview, upon request, we shared the questions with participants (Odendahl & Shaw, 2011). The three research questions of our study formed our interview schedule: (a) what are the impacts and benefits of affiliation? (relative advantages), (b) what cultural changes and strategies must be used? (compatibility), and (c) what are the continuing issues and challenges? (complexity, trialability, and observability). These questions provided a framework to guide each interview, while allowing us to probe deeper into participant responses with follow up questions based on their lived experience of adopting the innovation of affiliation. In each semi-structured interview, the researcher was the sole instrument of data collection.

Because the interviewer was the sole instrument, it is important to describe our positionality and how it influenced our findings. Two of the researchers in this study were early adopters of affiliation. One researcher has previous experience working in California, an early pioneer of affiliation. Three researchers are teacher educators who promote an integrated three-component model and instruct teacher educators on the importance of using classroom, FFA, and SAE in their programs. We did not have any relationship with participants or know them prior to the study. While our goal was neutrality and to limit bias, our analysis was through the lens of advancing the diffusion of affiliation, which may influence our interpretation of our findings.

Due to the sampling of participants being from three different states, we conducted each interview from a distance by phone. We tried to interview each of the eleven individuals who agreed to participate within a two-week interview period. At the beginning of each call, the interviewer discussed the purpose and scope of the study, and length and format of the interview. We limited each call to 30 minutes to respect participant's time. Each participant agreed to the use of audio recording at the start of the call and signed a consent form (Rose, 1994). We used a professional service to transcribe recorded interview audio, which we then examined for accuracy. While conducting the interview, we used reflexive journals to store and record notes, which we later used as a data source for triangulation. We stored all interview notes, transcripts, and records on a secure computer protected with a password to limit risk to participants. To support confidentiality, we assigned each participant a pseudonym (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Table 1 lists each participant's pseudonym, demographics, and descriptive data about their district.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race	Years Teaching	School Size	SBAE Teachers	Years Affiliated
Chris	51-60	Male	W/EA	31+	101-150	2	4 Years
Dan	41-50	Male	W/EA	21-30	601-700	6+	2 Years
David	21-30	Male	B/AA	0-2	301-400	3-5	>7 Years
James	51-60	Male	W/EA	31+	1-50	1	4 Years
Michael	31-40	Male	W/EA	11-20	51-100	1	2 Years
Robert	51-60	Male	W/EA	31+	51-100	1	6 Years
Sandra	51-60	Female	W/EA	21-30	51-100	1	>7 Years
Shelley	51-60	Female	W/EA	21-30	101-150	1	>7 Years
Tim	31-40	Male	W/EA	11-20	201-250	2	4 Years

Note: We assigned each participant a pseudonym to protect their identity. B/AA = Black or African American. W/EA = White or European American. >7 Years = the program was using a 100% membership model before National FFA approved it as a national option.

We originally planned to interview up to 23 participants but achieved data saturation sooner. While a larger sample size of 15-20 is generally desirable to achieve data saturation

(Creswell, 2002; Fusch & Ness, 2015; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012), qualitative researchers should focus less on a conducting a specific number of interviews and more on interviewing until there is a rich narrative to describe the phenomenon and no new information or concepts would emerge from additional interviews (Charmaz, 2006). After nine interviews, we felt sufficient themes had emerged to describe the innovation of affiliation for this specific case study, further interviews would not add new concepts, and it was appropriate to complete our data analysis.

Data Analysis

To create a rich narrative of themes during adopting affiliation, we used both deductive and inductive methods of data analysis, across multiple cycles of coding. During the first cycle of open coding, we used a descriptive/topic coding process to categorize and organize raw data. Descriptive/topic coding is the process of condensing qualitative data into a "word or short phrase, most often a noun," (Saldaña, 2013, p. 70) to represent the subject or topic of those data. Our semi-structured interview questions were grounded in deductive coding. We selected descriptive/topic coding as it would most easily identify topics within each of the research objectives (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2003; Wolcott, 1994). One researcher on the study used NVivo qualitative coding software to complete the initial analysis.

Following the first cycle of analysis, we considered the frequency counts of data and used inductive coding to establish broader themes and the relationship between codes. Frequency counts are a "basic descriptive statistical summary of information such as frequencies, ratios and percentages about a set of data" (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 205). Exploring the frequency, or how often a code or theme was discussed, helped us explore how themes might fit together and what was emerging as more common threads within our data (See Table 2). We discussed common codes, code frequency, and common themes of those codes in various combinations. After combining related themes and calibrating the code index, we conducted an additional cycle of coding and analysis to refine the themes within our data.

Table 2

Themes

Theme	Sub-Theme	Frequency	Time
Relative Advantages (Benefits)	Easier	74	11.78%
	Improved Participation	61	15.53%
	Meeting Standards/Requirements	42	13.35%
Program Compatibility (Strategies and Cultural Changes)	Student Join Culture	49	13.31%
	Teacher Mindset	48	14.37%
	Administrative Support	34	8.95%
	Grading	25	8.54%
	Partner Groups	22	6.64%
	Demographics	22	5.2%
Continuing Challenges	Financial Restrictions	55	13.55%
	Participation Opportunities	33	10.46%

Note: Frequency references the number of times a participant discussed a topic. Time represents the percentage of time discussing that topic, compared to the overall time of the interview. Percentages do not equal 100%, as a phrase might be coded at more than one theme (e.g., grading might make meeting standards easier).

It is important in qualitative research to examine the trustworthiness of findings, like the concepts of validity and reliability in quantitative research. Following the construction of themes

within our data, we evaluated the trustworthiness (i.e., credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) of our findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We triangulated the final coded themes with research memos and reflexive journals, and specifically looked for any evidence of overt bias due to our positionality and as the sole instruments in our study. Through multiple cycles of coding and confirming the trustworthiness of the findings, we ensured our results were as valid and relevant as possible.

Results

Through analysis and coding, three themes emerged: (a) relative advantages and the impact of affiliation membership, (b) program capability and implementation strategies, and (c) continuing challenges with complexity, trialability, and limited observability.

Theme One: Relative Advantages: Impact of Affiliation Membership

All nine teachers discussed the broad experience (i.e., "what?"), relative advantages of affiliation membership on their FFA chapter, and the reasons why they affiliated during the interviews. We coded responses into three common sub-themes, with some responses being coded to more than one theme (e.g., affiliation membership makes it easier to recruit for competitive CDE teams would be both "easier" and "improved participation").

Easier

When discussing the specific advantages of affiliating or reasons why they would recommend another program to affiliate, interviewees most often discussed that it made life and teaching easier. One teacher shared that she had never worked in a place where students were "breaking down my door to pay their FFA dues." She reflected, "I have always worked in areas where you had to sell it, you had to encourage them, you had to beg them to join… and I thought, 'well this is crazy.'" She felt that she was spending all her time begging students to join, and by the time she got them to join, whatever she wanted them to do had passed.

Within this sub-theme, teachers often talked about making it easier to manage and collect money and how beneficial it was to remove the barrier of dues. David shared that, "Dues, as small of an amount as that may seem, [for] some [students] that is a big obstacle that they have to overcome." He added, "If we let that little bit of money keep them from participating and being able to take part in FFA, I think that is kind of a shame on our part to let that happen and not do something about it." Teachers also discussed the changing demographics of their community and how money can be a limiting factor for families, which affiliation membership helped to alleviate. Dan reflected, "Everybody could use an advantage whenever it comes; to keep more money within their household or for their income to be used towards other things."

Interviewees also discussed how it made it easier to manage and complete rosters and paperwork. Teachers often talked of how it made their job easier as every student was already on the roster; rosters and paperwork could be completed less often allowing them to focus on more important topics. Sandra explained the worries and frustrations of a traditional dues-based membership structure as, "I must send another check; I am going to be invoiced again. [Affiliation] just makes life easier, not having to hassle with the paperwork, the red tape..."

Improved Participation

A second major sub-theme was that affiliation membership affected and often improved participation. Many teachers talked about improved attendance and participation since changing their program to the affiliation model. Tim noticed, "We have had greater attendance in our meetings, and there is no way to know this for sure, but I am pretty positive that we have had students get involved that otherwise might not have gotten involved beforehand." Michael shared

that improved participation was even noticed by the administration. After his first year of affiliation membership, there was an increase of about fifty people at the FFA banquet. The principal spoke to him after the event, "'I cannot believe you got these people to come to something, because those [students] are not in anything else!'" Michael claimed this is how he knew the program was working, "If you can get [students] actually involved in at least one thing, their success rate goes through the roof."

While many teachers discussed the positive impact of affiliation membership on participation, not all issues are alleviated. David said some of the same barriers of the dues system exist, especially in early conversations about what FFA is. He shared; students will say "'I did not sign up to be in this.' It is like a heel dug into the ground ... So, that issue is still there, it is even more prevalent I think when you do [affiliation membership]." David continued that while the old issue of buy in is not totally gone, the advantages still outweigh the challenges, as the barrier of 'if' has been removed, and now only 'what' and 'when' remain. He added, "There is no excuse on their part to why they cannot participate, except that they just do not want to or that it has not appealed to them, rather than they have never been given the opportunity."

Meeting State and Local Requirements.

A final sub-theme that appeared when discussing the advantages of affiliation membership was meeting state or local requirements. Robert shared how affiliation membership helped strengthen the three-component model in his program, "I cannot separate FFA from my classroom and SAE. It is a three-component model that always exists in my teaching program." Michael added, "I have aligned my curriculum so that most of my CDEs are taught during my classes … It has helped align my classroom and my FFA [components]; they overlap [more] now than ever before."

Some teachers discussed state level standards that affiliation membership helped to fulfill. In Georgia, program standards required a minimum of 80% of students enrolled in a SBAE course to be an FFA member. Shelley felt, "If you are going to do 80%, why not 100%?" Shelley and other teachers in Georgia often described affiliation membership as not being that drastic of a shift to their program, as they already had to have such a high percentage of membership, "[affiliation membership] just made it easier." While in Texas, where participation was not mandated, there were general leadership standards that affiliation helped to achieve.

Theme Two: Program Compatibility: Implementation Strategies and Cultural Changes

Strategies and Cultural Changes (i.e., "so what?") were the topics discussed most often during interviews, representing most of the time, including six sub-themes.

Student-Join Culture

Teachers often described student-join culture as the most important cultural change required to achieve compatibility when implementing the affiliation innovation. Shelley talked in depth that the conversation on student-join culture and participation tends to change from 'Do you want to join?' to "'What is something you want to do in FFA?' or, 'What is something you can get out of FFA?'" Michael reflected that it takes a while, but eventually the conversation shifted, "My first couple years of [affiliation membership] was hard for some [students] because they were always used to giving me the answer, 'I am not in FFA,' then they would try to be exempt from things." He added now that response no longer applies.

Tim shared how under this model, teachers must do an excellent job promoting the program and opportunities available to students, "because the students do not have to pay dues, sometimes I almost get the feeling that they take it for granted because they do not have any kind of investment

into it initially." Dan agreed adding, "They are not even sure what all can be done and is available to them, so that our job in their first year to open their minds." Dan also discussed that participation in activities is a requirement in his classroom; they use affiliation membership and provide FFA to all students, but in exchange have expectations. "We are going to help you become an FFA member. The next thing though, is we require you to find something to get involved with us and we have a menu of options." By requiring students to take part in leadership development activities, there are clear expectations and participation levels shift as students decide 'what' they will do in FFA, rather than 'if' they will do something.

Teacher Mindset

The affiliation membership model requires advisors to think differently about FFA and how they teach. Robert talked of how because affiliation membership is different and the language can be confusing, teachers need to be self-reflective and progressive. He shared, "I think there is some that do not quite abide by [the guidelines]," and instead of enrolling every student, they will skip some, claiming, "I am not putting every single name in because John Doe over here will never participate in anything local, district, state or national." David reflected this concern as well powerfully saying, "At the end of the day, FFA does not exclude any group of people from participating, and our whole goal as a teacher should be to reach out to every single student and give them the same opportunities."

Administrative Support

Administrative support was the third sub-theme in program compatibility. Most teachers felt their administration were 'hands off' while implementing affiliation membership. Robert—who had more than 30 years of teaching experience—shared that he knows best for his chapter and that he was "trusted by [his] administrators for a very long time." He thought this experience might not be true for all; if he were a new teacher with a strong administrator, "that would be more of a challenge." Sandra explained how not all administrators understand FFA and SBAE, let alone affiliation, "At this point with my administration, I feel like I could talk to them until I am purple in the face trying to explain that FFA and SAE are all part of [SBAE]." She felt some teachers might think it is easier to not ask, "if you do not ask, they cannot tell you no," but discouraged this idea.

Chris recommended caution as well. If a program is to implement affiliation, a good administrator will expect every student to be involved. He worried that an administrator is going to "raise an eyebrow" if they are under the impression every student is involved and part of something, but then a teacher only works with 25 of the 100 students.

Grading

A fourth subset of compatibility was grading. Many teachers discussed how FFA fits into their grading model, sometimes as a component of the grade, other times as optional extra credit. Tim shared how he changed his grading structure to now include FFA as a unit in each class worth "10% of their grade," and "required students to participate in a minimum of four FFA activities per semester." Sandra's experience was quite different, explaining how one reason she wanted to affiliate was to include FFA as part of the grade, but that administration "absolutely did not want me to do that at all." Instead, she included it as extra credit and found alternate ways to grade these activities. Robert talked of his rationale for including FFA in the grade, "There is no line that you can draw… it is kind of like you learn to play an instrument in band class, but if you perform in a concert, is that extracurricular or is that part of your class?"

Partner Groups

Like administration, it is important to consider compatibility of the innovation from the lens of partners like alumni, advisory council, and parents. Shelley talked about using her chapter's Alumni group to pay for the affiliation membership fee. Involving external partners and getting everyone on the same page was important to Michael, who noted that "they are the ones having conversations with those other parents and helping inform what opportunities and what things they can get out of the agriculture program." Michael felt it was more important than ever to be engaged in the community. To inform the community about FFA, a teacher needs to meet parents in their place of employment and out around town. "We are trying to educate the students as well as educate the parents."

Demographics

The changing nature of demographics was the sixth and final sub-theme in strategies for compatibility. Teachers commented by removing the barrier of dues and opt-in joining methods, the make-up of their chapters had shifted. Tim claimed that in his program, most students felt FFA was a "farming club" and would avoid paying dues because that image did not represent who they are. With the choice of joining removed, students would get involved and then realize that was not what FFA was. David noticed it opened up FFA to "athletic students" and "popular students" in his classes, while Michael felt it affected Hispanic populations in his program. James commented that as the socioeconomics of rural and suburban America changes to lower incomes, affiliation membership can be a boost to those families; that having to "pay that fee upfront from the beginning of the year was a mountain for them to climb." Michael described diversity as a domino effect: once the barrier was gone and a new group became involved, everything changed. "I had a good core, 4-5 years ago, of Hispanic students that really kind of got active, and then everybody else piggy backed off of that."

Theme Three: Continuing Challenges: Complexity, Trialability, Observability

Continuing challenges and future issues for consideration when adopting the innovation (i.e., "now what?") was the third and final topic; there were two sub-themes.

Financial Restrictions

Financial restrictions were the single greatest challenge mentioned by teachers when discussing affiliation membership. Every interviewee talked of fiscal concerns and finding a way to pay for the fee being the largest hurdle when implementing the system, with varying solutions proposed. As students were no longer paying dues, Shelley and Tim used fundraisers like fruit sales and greenhouse profits to cover the cost instead. James uses federal funding sources to pay the fee. Robert shared how a community partnership project—whose funds used to buy FFA jackets—now pays for affiliation membership. He added, "You need to think through the budget items before implementing. Do not jump until that item is sorted through." David and Sandra both partner with their alumni to cover the cost. Michael found that through affiliation membership, participation in fundraisers drastically improved, noting they had a $5,000–7,000 increase in fruit sales. He shared that those students may not have sold much, but the increased participation in tiny amounts added up. "You have 15 [students] that [sell a little], all of a sudden you have extra revenue which offsets [paying dues]."

In a potential grey zone of affiliation membership policies, Chris' program used a "lab/ shop fee." Their program pays the affiliation fee, but still collects $10 embedded into a lab fee for supplies and to help offset the costs, which is waived for students who face hardship. Such an approach may not be appropriate or legal in all states.

In addition to federal Perkins dollars, Dan was able to set up an agreement with his district to pay for FFA affiliation, like the affiliation fee structure used by the state athletics and activities

association. Dan shared that when his administrators claimed FFA affiliation membership was the weirdest thing they had ever heard of, "we were able to quickly point and go, 'it's been going on for eons with [athletics].'" Dan's advice was for teachers to look for similar programs like affiliation membership in their own districts that are already happening.

Participation Opportunities and Non-Traditional Membership

Participation opportunities and non-traditional membership was the second sub-theme when interviewees discussed challenges. Tim shared it is hard to find opportunities for 100% of his students to participate, which was easier before when there were not as many members. Chris felt frustrated that affiliation has led to a drastic increase in membership in his state, but opportunities have not increased equivalently. "We have [had a significant increase in FFA membership statewide] and we still have the same number of contests (LDEs, CDEs) that we had 10… 15 years ago." A Georgia teacher was worried because in a middle school they often have quarter long classes, rather than semesters. If every student in every class is a member, they might have more than 500 students in FFA, which impacts their affiliation fee. This specific teacher said they were unfamiliar with the middle school option within the affiliation membership agreement.

In summary, teachers at the nine schools of the case study felt FFA affiliation has positive benefits, but required changes to their program, and presented ongoing challenges. FFA affiliation, for these specific teachers, made life easier, improved participation for students, and made it easier for these teachers to meet state and local requirements. Strategies these teachers implemented included shifting how students think about membership (i.e., choosing to join vs. part of the class), grading social-emotional learning and FFA, interacting with administration and partner groups, and the shifting demographics of the program. Finally, continued adoption of the innovation of FFA affiliation may present financial challenges and problems finding opportunities for all students, which has notable implications for SBAE and FFA.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The FFA affiliation membership model, as an innovation, has important implications for SBAE. Little formal research has been conducted on affiliation. Though the SBAE profession has long believed in its three-component model, we have struggled to fully realize it. Some programs like California's Agricultural Incentive Grant have found success implementing 100% classroom, SAE/work-based learning, and FFA/social-emotional learning, leading to FFA affiliation as a national option. When adopting an innovation like affiliation, it is worthwhile to consider what teachers experience in terms of compatibility, complexity, observability, relative advantage, and trialability (Rogers, 2010). As FFA strives for 100% membership by 2028 (Deimler et al., 2021), it is crucial to study what relative advantages exist in this model compared to the previous dues model, what strategies are necessary to ensure compatibility of the innovation with existing programs, and what continuing challenges exist following adoption.

Conclusions

The purpose of this research study was to examine the impact of affiliation membership on the integral role of FFA in SBAE at nine schools within three states who were perceived as successful at FFA affiliation by their state department of education. Readers should be careful when generalizing the findings of this study, as different schools, or programs in different states, might have divergent experiences. Describing the relative advantages of the FFA affiliation innovation over the former dues model was our first objective. Participants of this study felt affiliation membership helped deliver a more integrated, complete three-component model of SBAE. During interviews, instructors stated that affiliation membership makes teaching easier, allowing them to spend less time on membership rosters and paying bills, and more time on teaching and advising

their students. They also felt that it made it easier to meet state standards and local requirements. Participants felt affiliation eliminated some of the subcultures in their SBAE programs (i.e., students who took the courses but were not in FFA) by removing the choice to opt out of what is supposed to be an integral part of their classroom experience. Finally, teachers often discussed how they felt the affiliation model improves the participation of students in SBAE and FFA activities. Our findings support the intentions and perceived benefits described by the National FFA Organization when they created affiliation (Case, 2010a; Croom, 2008). While the teachers we interviewed described specific advantages when implementing affiliation, they also had to shift their philosophy and practices for affiliation to be compatible.

Describing the cultural changes and strategies teachers at these schools implemented to achieve compatibility with the new membership model was the second objective of our study. Teachers implementing affiliation membership may need to change the culture of the students, the program, and their community. Participants in this study often discussed concepts of student-join culture, specifically how the conversations around participation and opportunities in the program changed under affiliation membership, which is important as the perception of the program can be one of the greatest barriers to participation (Hoover & Scanlon, 1991; Martin & Kitchel, 2014). Teachers reflected this effort must be intentional, as FFA was no longer an elective, optional component of the program; this might be especially important for students who do see themselves as welcome in FFA (e.g., students of color) or non-participative students who try to opt-out or claim they are "not in FFA" (Jones, 1998; Russell et al., 2009). Instead of being optional, many teachers expect all students to participate in local leadership development opportunities in an affiliated program. The membership/participation conversation shifted for teachers we interviewed from "Do you want to join FFA?" to "What do you want to do in FFA/leadership?" Such observations would support research that students may not join or participate if they do not know enough about the organization or its benefits (Talbert & Balschweid, 2004). The initial transition to affiliation membership away from collecting dues proved difficult for some students who held previous perceptions about FFA and were familiar with former practices with dues. Teachers needed to change their own mindset as they worked to provide opportunities to all students. Teachers shifted how they viewed FFA as well, from an optional program to now a component of their class with instructional time, measured participation, and often worth a grade. It was also important to consider the perceptions of and support from administrators and partner groups like their community, alumni, and industry advisory committees. While administration might be "hands-off" or trust their teacher's expertise, teachers may need to involve administration and external partner groups early in the process of adopting affiliation to prevent later ongoing challenges.

Finally, examining the continuing challenges and new barriers of affiliation was the third objective of our study. Every teacher interviewed discussed financial concerns with the program and their ability to shift the financial burden of membership from the student to the district. Some districts found affiliation made finances easier, as fundraising also increased as more students became involved, but that transition took time. Finding relevant and meaningful experiences for all students to participate in was also a concern some teachers shared, as state associations struggled to keep up with the growing membership base.

Implications

While the results of our study are limited to the participants we examined, our findings demonstrate some evidence that FFA affiliation may provide specific advantages over traditional dues, but also concerns. If the affiliation innovation does make teaching easier, this might have implications for teacher recruitment and retention and could be a tool against teacher burnout. That said, teachers in our study expressed great concern about the affiliation fees. Shifting the burden of dues from students—where it arguably should have never been to begin with—to the district, may

create unforeseen challenges with local funding and limited budgets. The fee structure FFA uses for affiliation will likely have a large impact on the adoption of the program.

Secondly, while teachers we interviewed spoke of increased student participation under the affiliation model, such statements should not be conflated to mean simply adopting affiliation immediately creates diversity and inclusion or causes an increase in participation. Student participation is nuanced. Teachers in our study felt that removing the barriers of a membership application and no longer charging students a fee to participate did improve student engagement, but also shared how it required shifting the culture of their program and how they think about FFA. However, if affiliation does increase participation, and as FFA strives for 100% membership (Deimler et al., 2021), there may not be enough student opportunities. This can be especially true if SBAE teachers view participation through the lens of engagement above the chapter level, rather than engaging all students in local and community focused programs.

Recommendations

Our study was narrow in focus. Future researchers examining FFA affiliation should use both explanatory and experimental approaches to evaluate if the advantages, strategies for compatibility, and continuing challenges we observed at the specific schools in our study apply to more generalized audiences. It would also be useful to study the spectrum of student participation under both models, specifically for students of color and those historically oppressed in the industry of agriculture, to determine if these findings map to a larger population outside of our limited inference space. Further research should examine the financial barriers and implications of both charging dues to individual students and the implication of districts paying these fees instead. As teachers described the affiliation fees as a substantial and concerning challenge, we recommend the National FFA Organization evaluate the affiliation fee structure, and even consider eliminating these fees/dues all together, at least on the national level. It may be possible that the benefit of eliminating this barrier and burden on local programs outweighs the funding it generates for the organization. If FFA is meant to be integral and essential to SBAE, it may not be appropriate to charge for access to it (California Department of Education, 2016; National FFA Organization, 2016; Sheehan & Moore, 2019).

We recommend national and state leaders develop best practices and implementation guides with fundraising ideas and strategies to help FFA chapters, which would address the attributes of diffusion by making the innovation more observable and compatible, less complex, and demonstrate the advantages of the system (Rogers, 2010). FFA state associations should examine their current events to ensure sufficient opportunities for student participation, particularly with National FFA's goal of 100% membership by 2028 (Deimler et al., 2021). We encourage continued implementation and exploration of 100% participation models in SBAE (Cheek et al., 1994; Talbert & Balschweid, 2004), as they may make teaching easier, eliminate barriers, and improve student achievement and participation.

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