

# Community College Transfer Students' Agricultural Career Decision Making



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## Author Note

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## Abstract

This qualitative study examined undergraduates' perceptions of their career decision-making. All of the participants (N=10) were community college students who transferred to the North Carolina State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. This study examined the various influences that affect a student's career choice and aspirations, including the student's perception of their abilities, preferences, and pursuing what they feel is a match between these and potential job requirements; background; parental influence; and curricular and co-curricular experiences. This study engaged students in 20 individual interviews: two interviews with each student over the course of the semester. Key findings included the substantial role of personal interests – namely an interest in plants, animals, and being outside – in prompting the students' decision to pursue agriculture. Most students were influenced by mentors who were employed in the students' intended careers. In addition, curricular and co-curricular experiences played an essential role in participants' agricultural career choice and academic major. A primary recommendation is to connect mentors in agricultural careers with community college students to foster the students' awareness of agricultural careers.

*Keywords:* Community College, Career Decision Making, Transfer Students

Examining the factors that influence students to choose agriculture as a college major can help us fill the many agricultural jobs that require a college education (Blackburn et al., 2016). Community college students comprise an essential resource for the 60,000 highly technical agriculture job opportunities yearly in the United States (USDA, 2020). Likewise, colleges of agriculture have done much to engage community college students in baccalaureate degree programs including identifying factors that support degree attainment in agricultural education (Howerton et al., 2019), creating pathway programs, and coordinating academic advising (Jones et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to understand how community college students who transfer to four-year colleges of agriculture make decisions to pursue an agricultural career.

## Career Decision Making

Research indicates that students have several influences that impact their career choice. Broadly stated, these influences are parents and mentors (Otto, 2000) and personal interests and experiences (Lent et al., 2002). Young people tend to seek career advice from their parents and from people outside their household (Otto, 2000). Young people are much more confident in their career choices when they have had previous experiences, inclusive of school activities and job shadowing, that connect them with careers (Lent et al., 2002). Young people utilize these influences – parents, mentors, personal interests, and experiences – to help themselves explore their curiosities in career outcomes and salaries (Lent et al., 2002). Regarding decision making for agricultural careers, students exposed to agriculture through 4-H or FFA have a higher probability of pursuing a career in agriculture compared to students who were not exposed to agriculture (Duncan et al., 2015).

Research shows that students typically make career

decisions based on their perceptions of their abilities, personal interests, and pursuing what they feel is a match between these and potential job requirements (Kniveton, 2004); background; parental influence; and curricular and co-curricular experiences (Lent et al., 1994). However, career indecision among students pursuing agriculture is high (Lancaster & Lundberg, 2019) which leads to a need for career advising and counseling. Career advising and counseling supports students to work through their career indecision with a professional who should provide them with resources to explore and decide on a career. The overall purpose of this study was to understand varied influences on career aspirations of community college students who transfer to a large college of agriculture including the students' perceptions of their background, parental influence, and curricular and co-curricular experiences.

### Methods

This qualitative study drew upon phenomenological research methods as well as appreciative inquiry to understand how students who transferred from community colleges to North Carolina State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs) chose to pursue agriculture as a career.

### Theoretical Framework

This study used Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) as a theoretical framework to inquire about how and why careers are chosen (Lent et al., 1994). The SCCT "... is a model of career development that delineates how personal inputs, contextual affordances, and sociocognitive variables affect the formation of vocational interests, career goals, and actions" (Schaub, 2004, p. 305). Prior SCCT research has examined the role of educators in students' career decision-making as well as career counseling. Liu et al., (2020) found that teachers play a huge role in career choice and student employability through their teaching methods, for example teaching students to problem solve (Liu et al., 2020).

### Participants

The study participants were undergraduates enrolled at North Carolina State University CALs and who all transferred from a community college. In this study, a community college student is someone who completed at least one semester at a community college. In North Carolina, 58 community colleges are located to serve the state's 100 counties. While 45 of these community colleges provide instruction in agriculture, these agricultural courses are typically part of an applied associate degree program and do not necessarily transfer to a baccalaureate program. North Carolina State University CALs enrollment makes up 10.35% of the university as a whole with 3,887 students (North Carolina State University Institutional Strategy and Analysis, 2022). North Carolina State University CALs welcomes around 200 transfer students every year, which accounts for around 5% of students in the College. Of

the 200 transfer students approximately 80 (40%) are community college transfer students. The participants (N=10) were recruited through a promotional flyer shared with two North Carolina State University mentoring programs for community college students as well as two introductory seminar courses in agriculture.

### Data Collection and Analyzation

Qualitative research allows one to get in-depth responses from the participants (Prokopy, 2011), which is why two separate interviews were conducted with the participants. The first interview was conducted at the beginning of the fall semester and the second was performed at the end of the fall semester. Two separate interviews were necessary to observe changes that occurred, if any, during the transfer students first semester at North Carolina State University. These interviews were conducted via Zoom and were video and audio recorded. In total, 20 interviews were conducted, two interviews with each of the 10 participants. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions that allowed insight into the college experiences and why these students chose to pursue agriculture as a career. Example interview questions from the first interview included: "To what extent, if at all do you think that your family has had an impact on your choice to pursue agriculture as your career?" and "In what ways, if any, did your previous community college experience influence you in pursuing an agricultural career?" (see Appendix A). An example question from the second interview was "Are you still interested in pursuing the same career that you were at the beginning of the semester? If yes, why? If no, why?" (see Appendix B). Each of the 10 students participated in both interviews. Interviews were conducted to the point of saturation to where no new information was conveyed.

A key limitation was due to the population of North Carolina State University CALs students recruited for the study. There was a higher proportion of both women and in-state students in this study, consistent with the CALs student population (Stearns et al., 2023). The study participants were predominantly animal science majors and students who reported having career mentors. Moreover, only two of the 10 participants had completed their associate degree before transferring. This study was conducted with the permission of the Institutional Review Board at North Carolina State University. Coding was used to analyze interview transcripts in a meaningful way (Creswell, 2015). Deductive coding was used whereby the major concepts represented from the literature were codes, namely students' perceptions of their abilities, preferences, background, parental influence, and curricular and co-curricular experiences. The themes discussed in the following section emerged from the transcripts and coding.

**Results****Theme 1. Students' interests and experiences have greater influence in career decision-making compared to parents and family backgrounds.**

Participants pointed to their experiences in 4-H and/or FFA, internships, work, and personal interests as having an influence on their career choice. In contrast, participants reported that parents did not play a substantial role in affecting career choice. Additionally, only three participants grew up on a family farm.

Six of the ten participants were involved in either 4-H, FFA, or both. Each of these students discussed the large influence that these organizations had in their pursuit of agriculture. Participants felt that these organizations gave them an early look into the many different career options within agriculture and allowed them to explore the parts of agriculture they were most passionate about. One participant explained how her experience with 4-H and her local Extension office played a large role in her career decisions. "Just doing local volunteering with the Ag Extension offices and 4-H or just anything related to agriculture within my community has really just shown me all the routes that are possible through agriculture like there's not just one thing" (Participant 5).

Three of the students explained that being able to go to community college allowed them to work in jobs that were related to agriculture, which is something they feel they would not have been able to do if they came straight into a four-year university. All of the animal science students who are planning on veterinary school have either had or currently have experience working at a veterinarian's office. They all expressed that working at a veterinarian's office really helped them to solidify their career choice as they are getting real career experience. Participant 7 said "Working in the veterinary profession while going to school is probably a good thing. I get to see every day what I am working towards and get to observe all sorts of really interesting things."

Participants were also asked about their career and academic interests. All of the participants who are majoring in animal science all had very similar answers. They all stated that they have a love of animals, some of the students preferred small animals while others were more interested in livestock and horses. Participant 1 stated that "I really do enjoy working with animals. So, no matter what career I ended up with, it would be with animals".

Parental influence plays a role in the encouragement of students to pursue career opportunities but does not largely influence the actual career choices of the students. This lack of parental influence on career choices was true for those with and without a family farming background. Participants reported that their parents encouraged their individual interests, but parents did not encourage a certain career decision. An example of this would be a participant who, as a pre-adolescent, was very interested in medicine but not exactly in human medicine. The father, a medical doctor, knew that she had a strong interest in livestock, so

he helped her start a small hobby farm. He was a great encouragement to her when she chose veterinary medicine as a potential career. In fact, of the 10 participants, six reported that their parents encouraged them to make their own career choice and they felt supported by their parents, but their parents did not specifically promote agricultural careers. We do not know the extent to which the parents may have directly connected the participants with professionals and internship opportunities.

**Theme 2. Community college contributes little to agricultural career choice.**

The participants were asked about their community college experiences and how these connect to their North Carolina State University CALS experiences. All of the participants explained in their own way how their community college experience helped them feel more prepared for the classes and experiences they are having now at North Carolina State University. They each explained how taking classes at the community college level allowed them to understand what it is like to juggle classes, homework, and social life which made them feel a step above their peers that went straight into a four-year institution. One participant pointed out that she was much more comfortable reaching out to her professors compared to her classmates that did not go to a community college because she had more experience doing so. Participant 5 stated that "I think it's helped me better than nothing at all, having that little bit of aid to help me, like with communicating with professors, or just knowing how Moodle worked." The participants explained the classes were not as rigorous as they are at North Carolina State University, but they felt it was a much easier transition rather than just coming straight from high school. A representative comment shared by Participant 9 was "community college academically was not too difficult but helped train me for the classes I am in now, in ways of studying and being used to lecture style teaching". Additionally, none of the students took any agriculture classes at their community colleges due to those classes not being transferable to their North Carolina State University CALS baccalaureate degree program.

Community college allowed these participants to be more confident in their own abilities at the university level but had no impact on their choice to pursue agriculture as a major and future career. All participants took general education classes they were certain would transfer to a four-year university, and all participants knew they wanted to major in agriculture before they attended both community college and North Carolina State University. Notably, only two of the 10 participants had completed their associate degree at the community college before transferring. The range of transferred credit hours was 36 to 71 with a mean of 49 (Table 1).

### **Theme 3. Mentors influence career and major choices in a number of ways**

The participants all shared how a certain mentor or mentors in their life had really pushed them and encouraged them to pursue their current major and hopefully future careers. One common mentor among the participants was either an Extension 4-H Agent or an FFA Advisor. Each one of these participants expressed gratitude to these mentors and how they were able to get exposure to the various career possibilities in agriculture. Participant 4 stated, “you know I don't think I ever thought I would go into like agriculture until I was in FFA, and like saw that side of it and how like my FFA teacher impacted me”.

Additionally, some of the animal science students had mentors in their intended career field. Of the five participants planning on becoming a veterinarian, two of them had a veterinarian who was their mentor, and another had a pre-vet student as their mentor. Participant 3 said,

After I chose what I wanted to do, my dog's veterinarian ... was really influential [to me]; I actually have his personal phone number. He would call me like late at night, we would have conversations about what to do about my dog, and he was like, really supportive and anything, and he would teach me how to help him and everything like that. So, I would say he's been a really big mentor for me.

A table with each participant's major, intended career, and their mentors can be seen in Table 1. Of the 10 participants, nine identified a mentor in a career that matched their intentions. Of these nine, all identified one mentor except for Participant 1 who identified multiple large animal veterinarians.

### **Theme 4. Self-efficacy and confidence are multi-faceted in community college transfer student career choice in calS.**

The participants discussed their confidence in their career choice. For example, one question that was asked to students was “How confident are you in your decision to pursue agriculture as a career, what has made you feel that way?”

All of the participants majoring in Animal Science stated that they were “pretty confident” (Participant 1) in their career decisions. Yet, these Animal Science students expressed slightly lower confidence compared to the other participants. Participant 1 stated they were “Pretty confident. I actually just applied to the vet school. I know that I just love working with animals like no matter what job I do, it would always include animals.” They were all confident in terms of pursuing a career they were passionate about but were not as confident in their abilities in attending veterinary medicine school. Participant 5 explained she has full confidence she wants to be a veterinarian but is not fully confident in her ability to get into veterinary school: “I'm not overly confident, some days are harder than others, but I am not, not confident”.

In regard to career choices, participants in other CALS majors expressed confidence with no hesitations. Participant 6, who is a Crop and Soil Science Major stated that “I'm very confident, it's just something I'm passionate about. I've really enjoyed learning more about it, and all the opportunities that are available with it, and it's an emerging field.” The differences between Animal Science majors and their hesitancy about veterinary medicine school admissions compared to all other students who expressed confidence underscores that self-efficacy and confidence are multi-faceted for these students.

### **Theme 5: CALS experiences in courses and clubs reinforce career decisions.**

Participants all pointed to very positive experiences with clubs and classes in North Carolina State University CALS. Participants all feel that these classes and organizations have made them feel more confident in their career decisions. When asking Participant 1 if they had any experiences that helped solidify their career choice this semester they stated, “The animal science classes for sure, it is really interesting to learn about the anatomy in the physiology of all these different species and seeing how much I enjoy it”. Participant 5 stated, I feel being involved with the Animal Science Club and hearing a lot of different stories from agriculture professionals, and then also being out on the beef education unit a lot and those interactions and experiences have helped me like kind of implant in my mind in future careers. Additionally, when asked about their CALS academic advisor, all participants stated their academic advisor was helpful with scheduling classes, but because all participants chose a career and major before coming to college, academic advisors had little to no impact on career choices. At North Carolina State University students are assigned to an advisor based on their major, and the role of the advisor is to assist students with choosing classes and navigating career opportunities.

# COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRANSFER STUDENTS' AG CAREER CHOICES

Table 1

Participants

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Gender	F	F	F	F	F	M	F	F	F	F
Major	ANS; PV	ANS; PV	ANS; PV	AE	ANS; PV	CSS	ANS; PV	ANS & ABM	ABM & E	AE
Residence	IS	IS	IS	IS	IS	IS	IS	IS	OS	IS
FFA or 4-H	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	Y
Family Farming Background	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N
Intended Career	V	V	V	AT	V	PG	V	ABI	AL&PM	AT
Mentor	V	PVS	V	FA	FA	PGP	NI	AP	AL&PM	FA
Completed Associate Degree	N	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N
Transfer Credit Hours	51	38	71	48	43	37	61	45	60	36

Note. F= Female; M= Male; ANS-PV= Animal Science-Pre Vet; AE= Agriculture Education; CSS= Crop and Soil Science; ABM= Agricultural Business Management; E= Economics; IS= In State; OS= Out of State; N= No; Y= Yes; V= Veterinarian; AT= Agriculture Teacher; PG= Plant Geneticists; ABI= Agricultural Business Industry; AL&PM= Agriculture Law and Policy Maker; PVS= Pre Vet Student; FA= FFA Advisor; PGP= Plant Genetics Professor; NI= Not Identified; AP= Agriculture Professional. The mean number of credit hours transferred from community college was 49.

## Summary

Of the various SCCT factors, two of these – interests and experiences – are applicable to understanding the career decision-making of the community college transfer students in North Carolina State University CALS who participated in this study. Participants pointed to their 4-H and/or FFA experiences and their part-time, temporary work and internship experiences as influencing them to decide on agriculture as a career. Likewise, a 2011 study found that FFA membership, 4-H membership, and agriculture related experiences have the largest influence on a student's choice to pursue agriculture related careers (Lawver & Torres, 2011). Consistent with Liu et al., (2020), teachers were influential in the students' career choices, and in this study, the teachers were specifically in the context of 4-H and FFA.

In contrast to SCCT, neither parental influence nor family farming background were perceived by participants in this study as significant factors in career choice. The participants did appreciate the encouragement they received from their parents in their career choice, but

they did not regard their parents' opinions over their own personal interests, experiences, and mentors' opinions. In contrast, Rayfield et al. (2013) found freshmen in a College of Agriculture placed their parents as the largest influence on their pursuing agriculture as a career, which is a stark contrast to participants in this study, as none of the participants referenced their parents as influencing them to choose a career in agriculture. Notably, this could be because of generational differences of students who entered college in 2013 versus 2022, and parenting styles changes during those 9 years (Serrano, 2021).

Community college allowed these participants to be more confident in their own abilities at the university level but had little to no impact on their choice to pursue agriculture as an academic major and future career. Additionally, the research shows community colleges positively impacted students' self-efficacy and prepared them for four-year universities. This can be attributed to the experiences they had at the community college level which allowed them to get practice and experience in taking classes at a college level as well as communicating with professors (Branson & Green, 2007). Importantly, all participants decided on

a career before attending community college and none changed their career pathway.

North Carolina State University CALS agricultural classes and student organizations are consequential for increasing confidence in career choice and providing more information and experiences towards agricultural careers. None of the participants in this study took any agriculture classes at their community colleges because of the classes not meeting baccalaureate degree requirements. Participants described North Carolina State University CALS courses, clubs, and educational units "give you opportunities and widen your view of what the field encompasses" (Participant 1).

Mentors are highly influential in career choice; specifically, the participants identified mentors in the same career pathway as they intended. Eight out of ten participants were able to identify a mentor in their intended career field, one participant identified a mentor in agriculture, but not in their specific discipline. This is aligned with Dyer et al. (2002) who explained that students with a mentor in agriculture are more likely than their peers to complete an agriculture degree and start a career in agriculture.

Personal interests such as plants, animals, teaching, youth, and being outside, are impactful on a student's career choice. Every participant individually mentioned at least one of these five interests. For example, Participant 6 spoke about how his love of plants and gardening was a huge factor when he was choosing a college major. This is a positive as students who are interested in what they are studying are proven to do better in their courses and are more likely to pursue their interest(s) as a career (Ikuemonisan et al., 2022).

### Discussion

In SCCT, the career decision-making influences are regarded as playing an equal role in career decision-making (see Lent et al., 1994). This study, although limited to the experiences of a small group, shows that experiences, mentors, and personal interests play a much larger role than other influences including parents and aptitude. Regarding experiences, 4-H and FFA participation were major factors in a student's career choice in agriculture, consistent with Duncan et al. (2015). Community colleges should explore engaging with high school students in 4-H and FFA and explain the benefits of going to community college as well as explaining transfer pathways to four-year universities. Colleges of agriculture should be recruiting community college students who participated in 4-H or FFA.

Additionally, CALS academic advisors should strongly encourage students in colleges of agriculture to pursue internships and work experiences to help curb career indecision, improve their confidence in agriculture career choices, and connect them with agricultural professionals who could be important mentors. The career experience gained through internships and job experiences not only reduces career indecision but also increases the likelihood of securing a job after graduation (Feldpausch et al., 2019). Moreover, CALS clubs and classes should be highly encouraged to all CALS students to ensure they get hands-

on experiences in their future career fields. The academic advisors could help align students with mentors in their future career fields to increase students' career confidence and self-efficacy by providing a list of agricultural professionals in their intended career fields.

This research was limited to the community college transfer students in the North Carolina State University CALS; therefore, further career decision making research is recommended at multiple colleges of agriculture. Additionally, this study had nine female participants and one male participant. Yet, in Fall 2022 when this study was conducted, CALS had 146 transfer students with 82 reporting female (56%) and 64 reporting male (44%) (Institutional Strategy and Analysis, 2024). It would be beneficial for a larger study to be completed that reflects more gender diversity. A limitation of this study was that limited demographic information was collected from the participants. However, community colleges serve a large number of students who are underserved in higher education. According to the College Board, 51% of community college students identify as a race other than white (Ma & Baum, 2016). In addition, 42% of community college students are first-generation college students, 13% are single parents, 12% have a disability, 6% are non-US Citizens, and 3% are veterans (Clay, 2012). It is recommended that all of these diversity factors should be considered in research engaging community college students.

Further research is recommended that follows up with participants' mentors. Such research would contribute to understanding how mentors view their role in mentees' career choices. A longitudinal research study that follows the participants through graduation and into their careers is recommended to further contribute to our understanding of career decision-making. This research was also limited by time and resources. A longer research period that looks at students during their time at the community college, the transfer transition period, senior year, and going into the workforce would create a broader understanding of their career and major choices.

The students in this study had already made up their mind that they were majoring in agriculture and attending North Carolina State University. For other students not identified in this study, a pathway or connection to North Carolina Community Colleges with North Carolina State University CALS needs to be maintained and strengthened for community college students who take agriculture classes while in community college. This would also be beneficial for North Carolina State University CALS because they would gain more community college transfer students. It is important to promote mentoring programs as they may be beneficial to community college students' career decision-making.

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