FFA Diversity – Establishing Benchmarks and Tracking Developing Trends

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Introduction

California's agricultural programs serve over 65,000 students and are arguably the most active of the career and technical education programs in the state. The state's political leadership has repeatedly expressed concern that the state's public schools are not addressing the non-white population, most notably the Hispanic population. In this political environment it is important to know and understand the diversity of FFA programs. Statistics are plentiful but rarely meaningful in understanding the actual diversity of FFA programs. California is a very diverse state with large geographic population variations. For example, Los Angeles County is 49% White while Sierra County is 94% White as reported by the 2000 Census. This study develops meaningful statistics that can be used as benchmarks for future studies. Short-term trend analysis was developed to track changes in program diversity.

Conceptual Framework

Much has been discussed about FFA diversity. Croom and Flowers (2001) determined that in North Carolina a sense of belonging was a motivating factor in joining FFA and that gender and ethnicity were not factors in FFA participation. Given this finding the expectation would be that FFA would reflect the school diversity. Statistics are available from many sources but typically all schools are lumped together. A typical example reports Hispanics as comprising some percentage of the student population (Frey, 2005, and Snyder, 2006) in the state. However this masks the true diversity in the state which has large variations between schools. By many states' measures California FFA is very diverse with Whites comprising only 46% of FFA in 2005, however in the schools in which these programs reside Whites comprise only 41% of the population.

Methodology

Data for this study was extracted from the on-line data reporting system developed by the author to capture FFA roster and agricultural program data (R-2, 2007). This system has been used to collect program data since 2000 and FFA roster data since 2002. Additional school data was extracted from the California Department of Education CBEDS system from the School Information Form (SIF) (CBEDS, 2007). All data is self-reported by the agriculture program or school district. Agriculture program and student data was extracted from a SQL database into MS-Access. CBEDS data was downloaded from the CBEDS website and imported into MS-Access. Data sets were combined and processed for analysis in MS-Access then extracted for analysis in MS-Excel and SPSS (version 15.0). Available data was examined from 2001-2002 through 2007-2008 school years, but not all data is available for all years. To make meaningful comparisons of agriculture program diversity to the populations they serve, metrics were developed for each school with an agriculture program. The approximately 330 agriculture programs were then compared to their schools. The actual number of schools with agriculture programs compared varies by year.

Results Summary

Both student gender and ethnicity were examined. Ethnicity analysis concentrated on White and Hispanic populations since these typically account for 80% or more of the students. Analysis of gender showed that school populations were almost evenly split (49% female). Analysis of agriculture programs shows that females made up only 42% of this group. Most of this difference can be explained by programmatic gender imbalance. For example only 10% of the agricultural mechanics students were female while 73% of the ornamental horticulture (O.H.) students were female. However agricultural mechanics students and O.H, students made up 27% and 9% respectively of the total FFA members. Diversity trends were examined for the period 2002-2007. During this period grades 9-12 agriculture programs grew from 54,974 to 63,938 a 16% increase in students. During this same time agricultural mechanics students grew by 32%, however agriculture program gender was not found to be significantly different for this period (41.81% to 42.76% female). Most of this lack of overall change can be attributed to a 3% increase of female students in agriscience programs.

The ethnicity of students during this period changed for high school and for agriculture programs. From 2001 to 2006 White student populations shrank from 44% of the school population (with agriculture programs) to 38%, and Hispanics increased from 41% to 47% during the same period. During this same period White agriculture students decreased from 59% to 48% and Hispanic agriculture students increased from 34% to 43%. Only 3% of the states agricultural programs have Hispanic representation more than 10% higher than the school population, while 22% have Hispanic representation 10% lower than their school population. The remaining 75% of the agriculture programs have Hispanic representation within 10% of the population the programs serve. Significant differences in ethnicity were also seen between programs/career paths. For example O.H. programs averaged 53% Hispanic students and Animal Science only 32% Hispanic students in 2005-2006.

Conclusions/Implications

Conventional wisdom would suggest that FFA is more gender balanced or even more female, but the data reveals this is not the case. This perception is likely caused by the more active participation by female students in FFA leadership activities. Programmatic gender differences are not surprising for agricultural mechanics and O.H. programs. Ethnic differences are harder to explain. The vast majority of programs in California are within 10% of the same ethnic mix as the schools they serve. A few agriculture programs are very successful in attracting Hispanic students while others are attracting few Hispanics. An analysis of the programs on both ends of the spectrum is needed to determine the causes. Overall the Hispanic growth rate in agriculture programs is exceeding their school by over 40%. This suggests that in time parity will be reached.

Luft (1996) recommended that agricultural educators spend more time recruiting minority students. Given the ethnicity differences in programs (e.g. O.H) developing key programs that are attracting non-white students would affect program diversity. Likewise Bowen (2002) recommends a pro-active approach. These are certainly part of the solution. Another important aspect that requires additional research is the opportunity minority students have to take classes in agriculture. Anecdotal evidence suggests that increased emphasis on testing including the state high school exit exam may be limiting underperforming student's ability to enroll in agriculture classes. Hispanic students have a higher percentage of English Language Learners (ELL) which may be "tracked" differently. This has been offset somewhat by the increase in

courses such as Ag Biology which is taught for science credit. While the statistics are indicators of diversity they do not tell a complete story. Additional research needs to be done to isolate factors contributing to the lack of parity.

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