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ASSESSMENT OF JUNIOR HIGH/MIDDLE SCHOOL AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN NEBRASKA

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Abstract

The *purpose of the study was to identify, describe and assess the junior high/middle school agricultural education programs in Nebraska. Seventy-three programs reported having* a ***junior*** *high/middle school agricultural education program. Most of the programs had been in existence* ***10*** *years or less. A clear majroity of respondents had nine-week programs. Over half of the respondents that did not have junior high/middle school programs wanted to add the program, but the "school class schedule" was the most frequently identified deterrent. Those instructors not interested in adding a program cited a "full instructor schedule " as their major deterrent. For those who offered junior high/middle school programs, the most frequently cited opportunities for offering the program were to "promote agriculture awareness, " "recruitment for agriculture classes, " and "exposure to career opportunities in agriculture "*

Why should we expand agricultural education into our junior high/middle (grades 6-8) schools? There are several reasons to teach agricultural education to adolescents including: the issues of agricultural literacy; exploration of agricultural career interests; and utilizing experiential learning theory during adolescence.

Currently 97% of the U.S. citizens do not live on a farm or are not engaged in production agriculture. Obviously, food and food production are basic to human welfare and have played a major role in our history and the development of our culture. This development, however, has resulted in more policy makers and consumers having less knowledge of agriculture and its contributions to our society and economy than any time in our nation's history. Because of current and future issues related to agricultural policy, it is important for those 97% of the U.S. citizens who do not live on a farm or are not engaged in production agriculture to be literate in agriculture (National Research Council, 1988). To address this issue, the *Pilot Study of Agricultural Literacy, Executive Summary* (December 1993) recommended that elementary and secondary schools integrate instruction about agriculture throughout the curriculum.

Beyond agriculture literacy is the issue of career interests in agriculture. During early adolescence, students are formulating career interests and goals Barrick & Hughes, 1993). Psychologically, adolescent learners seek a positive self-concept and a high level of self-esteem. These learners experiment with a variety of roles and personalities in an attempt to identify who they are. The exploration of possible vocational roles supplements the development of adolescent social roles and together this development manifests itself in a more complete development of the adolescent's identity. Providing early introduction to agriculture careers during these years allows for career exploration. For the adolescent, it moves the process of career exploration from the abstract to the concrete, congruent with the learning pattern of the adolescent (Miller, 1988; Fritz & Bell, 1993).

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the study was to identify and describe the junior high/middle school agricultural

education programs in Nebraska. The results were used to plan, implement and deliver inservice education programs for junior high/middle school agricultural education instructors. The specific objectives of the study were to determine:

1. The extent and description of junior high/middle school agricultural education offerings in Nebraska;

2. Deterrents to adding a junior high/middle school component to local agricultural education programs;

3. The major local opportunities offered by a junior high/middle school agricultural education component; and

4. Major frustrations of teaching a junior high/middle school agricultural education component.

Research Methods and Procedures

The design of the study was a descriptive survey. The population of the study was the 126 secondary agricultural education instructors in Nebraska. The Agricultural Education Division of the Nebraska State Department of Education provided the official roster of agricultural education programs and instructors.

The questionnaire used for the study was designed by the researchers. Content validity of the instrument was determined by a panel of experts which included State Department of Education personnel, agricultural education faculty, agricultural education instructors, and an agricultural education student instructor.

A questionnaire packet (with a stamped, self addressed envelope) was mailed to the 126 instructors in the Spring of 1994. Second and third follow-up mailings were made two weeks and four weeks after the initial mailing. This process yielded 118 completed questionnaires or a return rate of 94%.

Results

Obi ective 1

Seventy-three (or 62%) of the 118 programs reported having a junior high/middle school agricultural education program, 45 (38%) did not. When asked the number of years the school had a junior high/middle school agricultural education program, the majority of the responses were "under 10 years." One instructor reported his school had a junior high/middle school component for 52 years.

When queried about the length of time students spent in the junior high/middle school component, the clear majority (39 of the 73) of respondents said they had nine week programs, 20 respondents had 18 week programs. Eight respondents (Figure 1) said there was no mandatory student participation, two schools said there was mandatory participation in the first year (7th grade), and elective participation in the second year (8th grade). Sixty-one respondents said there was mandatory participation with no qualification, two did not respond. Instructors representing two of the 73 programs indicated participation was segregated by gender (restricted to all female/all male junior high/middle school classes).

Obiective 2

Forty-five respondents did not have a junior high/middle school agricultural education component in their program, but 25 of these respondents (56%) were interested in adding a component (Figure 2). The deterrent most frequently identified by agricultural education instructors who wanted to add a junior high/middle school component was "school class schedule," followed by "full instructor schedule" and "administration." For agricultural education instructors who did not want to add junior

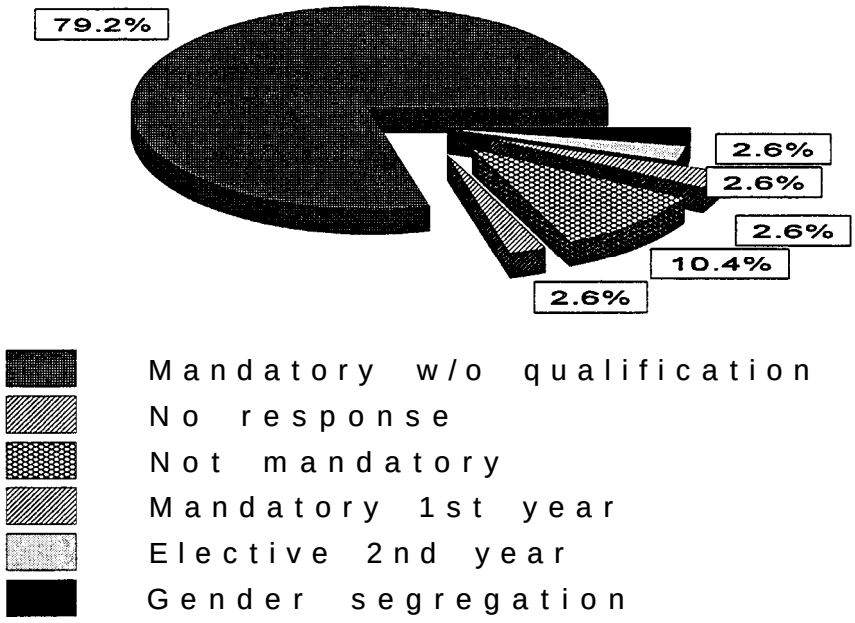

Figure 1. **Status** of Student Participation in Junior High/Middle School Agricultural Education Programs

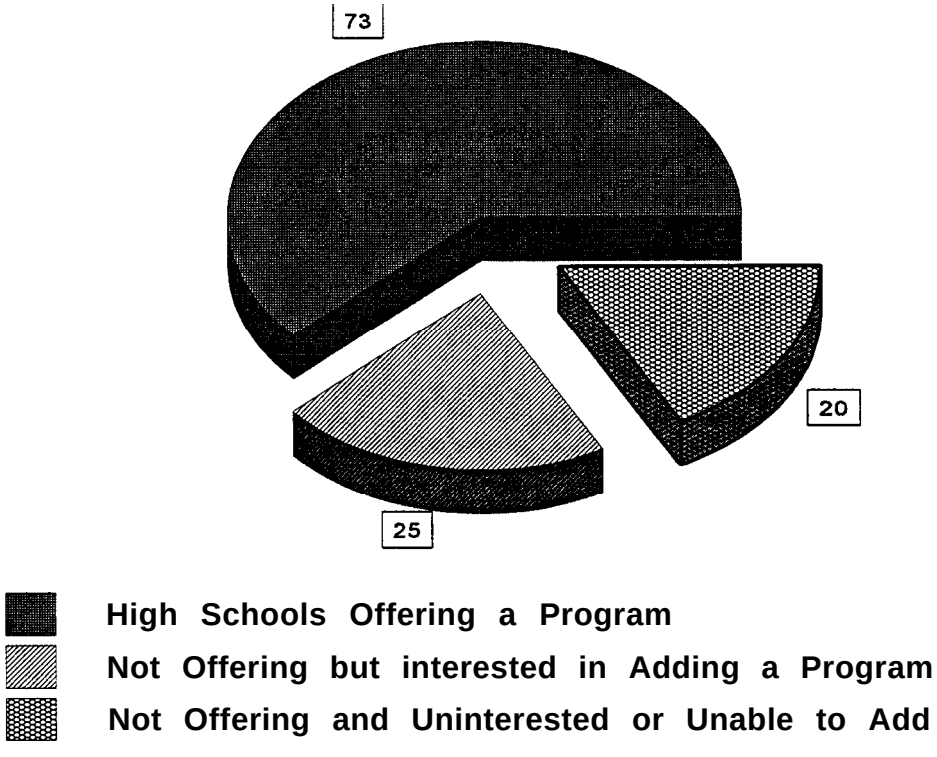

Figure 2. Future of Junior High/Middle School Agricultural Education Programs

high/middle school components, the most frequently cited deterrents were "full instructor schedule," "school class schedule," and "location of junior high/middle school facility."

Objective 3

When asked to identify the major opportunities (Table 1) offered by having a junior high/middle school agricultural education component, instructors most frequently said: "promote agriculture awareness" (33); followed by "recruitment for agriculture classes" (23), "exposure to career opportunities in agriculture" (22), and "introduce FFA to students" (19).

Table 1. Opportunities Associated with a Junior High/Middle School Agricultural Education Programs

Opportunities	# of Instructors Responding
Promote Agricultural Awareness	33
Recruitment for Agriculture Classes	23
Exposure to Career Opportunities in Agriculture	22
Introduce FFA to Students	19

Obi ective 4

The major frustrations of conducting a junior high/middle school agricultural education program are identified in Table 2. The number of instructors identified the following frustrations: "lack of resources and curriculum" (20); "varying levels of student interest and ability" (19); "extra demands on instructor class load and time" (16); "inadequate class length" (15); and "lack of junior FFA competition and related opportunities" (11).

Table 2. Major Frustrations Experienced by Instructors of Junior High/Middle School Agricultural Education Programs

Frustrations	# of Instructors Responding
Lack of Resources and Curriculum	20
Levels of Student Interest and Ability	19
Extra Demands on Class Load and Time	16
Inadequate Class Length	15
Lack of Junior High Competition and Related Ounortunities	11

Conclusions and Recommendations

Over the last ten years there has been a tremendous growth in the number of junior high/middle school agricultural education programs in Nebraska, this mirrors the increase in the number of other career-oriented education programs at the junior high/middle-grade level in recent years (Barrick & Hughes, 1993). This growth brings up several critical questions for post-secondary agricultural education. Are our future instructors being prepared in the psychology of the adolescent learner? Have instructors in the field who are offering these programs or looking to offer them been given inservice on the psychology of the adolescent learner?

It is unlikely every student that passes through an exploratory program will pursue an agriculture career. Regardless of career intent, students as future policy and decision makers need to have a working knowledge of the important role of agriculture in our society. Nebraska instructors see the primary opportunity associated with offering agricultural education at the junior high/middle school level as creating agriculture awareness. This opportunity addresses the challenge identified by the National Research Council (1988) and the *Pilot Study of Agricultural Literacy, Executive Summary* (December 1993). Given that the majority of agricultural education programs in Nebraska are offering these programs, instructors do not have

adequate exploratory agricultural education curriculum. Adequate curriculum would move the learner from the abstract to the concrete in an highly experiential mode. Adequate curriculum would also be augmented with current career path information related to agricultural concepts presented.

Class scheduling and a full instructor schedule were problems expressed by both those instructors interested in adding a junior high/middle school exploratory class and those not interested. Instructors in the field, as well as faculty who teach in post-secondary agricultural education programs, should emphasize the needs of the secondary agricultural education program in relationship to local, industrial, and national trends (National Research Council, 1988). In order to address these concerns, a greater emphasis by instructors in the field should be placed upon the importance of administrator relations, working within the local educational system and program planning. At the post-secondary agricultural education level, program planning should be broadened to include junior high/middle school as well as reinforce the determination of program needs, market analysis, and administrator relationships.

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