Perceptions Held About Agricultural Education by
Coronado High School Students, El Paso, Texas

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to identify what specific characteristics and environmental conditions were perceived to encourage or prohibit Hispanic students from enrolling in Agricultural Education programs and participating in Agricultural Education activities. Focus groups interviews were utilized for data collection.

This qualitative study utilized descriptive and casual-comparative research methods. The target population of this study was the 112 students from Coronado High School, El Paso, Texas, enrolled in the Production Agriculture / Agricultural Business program. A set of researcher-developed questions was used as a method to guide discussion of focus groups consisting of six to eight students per class period.

The findings from the study concerning the perceptions held about Agricultural Education by Coronado High School Students related to: (a) their decision to enroll in agriculture classes, (b) the perceptions of family and friends, (c) the perceptions of other teachers, (d) feelings of acceptance while participating in activities, and (e) ways to make everyone feel more accepted in Agricultural Education.

The findings of the study indicated that there were particular aspects of both Agricultural Education classes and activities that could possibly play a critical factor
in both encouraging and prohibiting Hispanic students from enrolling in Agricultural Education classes and participating in Agricultural Education activities.
Dedicated to my parents and grandparents

For teaching me all of life’s lessons I could never learn in a classroom.

And to my advisor and friend Dr. Jamie Cano

You knew what you were getting yourself into, thanks for seeing me through.
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Fields of Study

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background and Setting

The ethnic and racial composition of the population of the United States is changing. In 2005, the United States population was 69% White and 14% Hispanic (United States Census Bureau, 2004). The projected population in 2020 is about 60% White, and 18% Hispanic (United States Census Bureau, 2004). The United States’ population will continue to diversify with a projected Hispanic population growth at a rate of 39% from 2000 to 2010 and 45% from 2010 to 2030 (United States Census Bureau, 2004).

The national trend of an increasing Hispanic population is even greater within individual states: California, Florida, and Texas are three of the four most populated states, and are experiencing the most significant growth in Hispanic residents. Peterson and Assanie (2005) supported the findings of a rapidly growing Hispanic population and warned of a pending catastrophe. By 2020, Hispanics are projected to make up a majority of Texas’ population, and by 2040, Hispanics will account for more than 60% of all Texans, while just one-third of the population will be White.

Therefore, the education of Hispanic students in the United States has reached a crisis stage (Hart, 2006; Landgraf, 2008; Petersen & Assanie, 2005; The National
Association for Hispanic Education, 2010). Although the number of Hispanic students attending public schools has increased dramatically in recent decades, Hispanic students, as a group, have the lowest level of education and the highest dropout rate of any group of students. Conditions of poverty and health, as well as other social problems, have made it difficult for Hispanics living in the United States to improve their educational status. Consequently, one of the most pressing national education priorities has been to close the achievement gap between Hispanic and White students (United States Department of Education, 2000).

One basic educational premise is that all people can learn. There are cultural and historical practices, however, that have placed some students at risk of educational failure. Research (Schneider & Lee, 1990; Gonzalez, Moll, Floyd-Tenery, Rivera, Rendon, Gonzales, & Amanti 1993; Goldenberg, Reese, & Gallimore, 1992) has emphasized the importance of understanding the impact that cultural and historical factors have on educational success.

Another premise is that successful societies make the best use of their resources. So why isn’t the United States making the best use of its resources? No, this isn’t about drilling for oil. It is about drawing on an even more valuable resource – one abundant in every state in the country: talented Hispanic students whose intellectual potential too often goes untapped, and frequently leading to educational failure.

Another major factor leading to Hispanic students’ educational failure is that too many Hispanics “leak” out of the education pipeline once they are there. For example, while Hispanics are well represented in two-year community college programs, too few transition to, and graduate from, four-year college programs. If oil leaked from a

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pipeline at the same rate as Hispanic students leave the educational system, alarms would sound and fixes would be made. Don’t Hispanic students deserve the same urgency?

Clearly, the national picture is dismal. The demographical data for agricultural education parallels the national data. Within agricultural education, only small portions of Hispanic students are engaged in agricultural education. The National Council for Agricultural Education (2000), in *Reinventing Agricultural Education for the Year 2020*, found that only six percent of the high school population completed coursework in agriculture. The National Center for Agricultural Education’s proclamation stands in direct contrast to the assertion made by the National Research Council (1988) that agriculture was a topic too important to be taught to only a relatively small percentage of students. Millions of students each year, from all ethnicities, are missing out on the numerous benefits provided through Agricultural Education.

Agricultural Education has provided many benefits for students enrolled in the program, however underrepresented minorities are not gaining from those benefits. In order for Agricultural Education to grow and enhance the quality of programs, the Agricultural Education student body must resemble the diversity of this country, of local communities, and of individual schools.

In conclusion, the difficulties encountered by Hispanic students engaged in their quest for educational success points to the essential need for research on Hispanic students and the need to advocate ways to improve the Hispanic students’ academic success, especially as more and more Hispanic students prepare to enter agricultural related careers.
Problem Statement

The education of Hispanic students in the United States has reached a critical stage. Although the number of Hispanic students attending public schools has increased dramatically in recent decades, Hispanic students, as a group, have the lowest level of education and the highest dropout rate of any group of students (The National Association for Hispanic Education, 2010).

In addition, the National Council for Agricultural Education’s proclamation stands in direct contrast to the assertion made by the National Research Council (1988) that agriculture was a topic too important to be taught to only a relatively small percentage of students. Furthermore, millions of students each year, from all ethnicities, are missing out on numerous benefits provided through agricultural education.

In order for Agricultural Education to grow and be able to enhance the quality of courses and programs, the participants must resemble the overall student body. However, the problem is that it is not known which specific characteristics and environmental conditions are perceived to encourage or prohibit Hispanic students from enrolling in Agricultural Education programs and participating in agricultural education activities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify what specific characteristics and environmental conditions were perceived to encourage or prohibit Hispanic students from enrolling in Agricultural Education programs and participating in Agricultural Education activities.
**Research Questions**

The following questions were the focus for this study:

1. Describe what made the students decide to enroll in Agricultural Education classes.
2. Describe what the students’ families and friends say about the students enrolling in Agricultural Education classes.
3. Describe what the student’s think other teachers are saying about the Agricultural Education program.
4. Describe the students’ perception of participating in Agricultural Education activities, and whether or not they believe that they are accepted by the other people participating in the activity.
5. Identify what could be done to make everyone feel more accepted in Agricultural Education and activities.

**Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this study included:

1. The sample was limited to Coronado High School students and therefore is not generalizable to other schools or other students.
2. The study design did not allow for all students enrolled in the Agricultural Education classes at Coronado High School to participate. The design did not allow those students to participate who were not present at school on the day of the focus groups or those whose parents would not allow them to participate.
3. There were multiple focus group interviewers (3) that may allow for limitations in inter-rater reliability.
4. The research method was useful in gaining depth of the subject, but not breadth.

5. The data collection method of focus groups automatically has built in limitations that will be further elaborated in Chapter 3.

Assumptions

It was assumed in this study that:

1. Being that the students were minors under the age of 18, their parents or legal guardians granted them permission to participate in the focus group study.

2. The students were enrolled in agricultural education classes voluntarily.

3. Students’ experiences varied motivations for enrolling and continued participation.

4. The students answered all questions honestly and did not hold back important information.

5. Different individuals based on individual, social, and environmental factors experience Agricultural Education classes differently.

Definitions

The following definitions were used in this study:

1. The term *Hispanic student* means “a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.” As there were no other students evident of other ethnic identities, a *Hispanic student* was defined as a non-white student (Hispanic Student [Education] Law & Legal Definition).
2. An *Agricultural Education Program* is a systematic program of instruction available to students desiring to learn about the science, business, technology of plant and animal production, and/or about the environmental and natural resources systems.

**Significance of Study**

After the data has been collected and analyzed, the identification of common responses and perceptions from Hispanic students across various focus groups sessions will be used to further develop an instrument to be used on a larger scale. The instrument to be designed will allow future researchers to collect more usable data and start identifying what creates and maintains the barriers that are keeping Hispanic students from enrolling and participating in Agricultural Education programs and activities. The identification of these perceived barrier’s which are potentially creating issues, will allow for an opportunity to move Agricultural Education programs and activities in a direction that allows the Agricultural Education student body to resemble the diversity of this country, of local communities, and of individual schools.

Without question, it is clear that Hispanic students are “leaking” out of the educational pipeline. Also, without question, while Hispanic students are well represented in two-year community college programs, too few Hispanic students transition to, and graduate from, four-year college programs. If oil leaked from a pipeline at the same rate as Hispanic students “leak” from the educational system, alarms would sound and fixes would be made. Don’t Hispanic students deserve the same urgency?
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The National Trend

In 1998, agriculture was the United States’ largest employer, with more than 22 million people employed in some phase from growing food and fiber, to selling agricultural products at the retail level (American Farm Bureau, 1998). Today, according to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012), only 17 million people are employed in some phase of agriculture, with a continued decline forecasted. However, the demand for college graduates, especially ethnic minority individuals, in the agricultural related career fields continues to exceed the supply.

Foster and Henson (1992) stated that the agricultural sector is the foundation of any society, but in the United States, ethnic minority participation in agriculture and related fields is scarce. Demographic trends indicate that ethnic minority populations are increasing; and more of these students must be recruited into agricultural careers in order to sustain the agricultural industry (Mitchell, 1993).

Without dispute, the ethnic and racial composition of the population of the United States is changing. In 2001, it was predicted that by 2006, Whites would comprise 73% of the United States population, compared to only 11 % for the Hispanic population (Jones & Larke, 2001). Interestingly, by 2005, one year short of the targeted prediction
year of 2006, the United States population was 69% White and 14% Hispanic (United States Census Bureau, 2004). Yet, in another prediction, the projected population for 2020 is about 61% White and 18% Hispanic (United States Census Bureau, 2004). The United States Census Bureau (2004) further predicted that the United States’ population will continue to diversify with a projected Hispanic population growth at a rate of 39% from 2000 to 2010 and 45% from 2010 to 2030.

The national trend of an increasing Hispanic population is even greater within individual states: California, Texas, and Florida are three of the four most populated states, and are experiencing the most significant growth in Hispanic residents. Peterson and Assanie (2005) supported the findings of a rapidly Hispanic population and warned of a pending catastrophe.

The Education of Hispanic Students

Up until the progress of the past few years, the state of Hispanic education had not changed substantially for decades. Yet, despite being the fastest growing segment of the United States population and the youngest in median age (The National Association for Hispanic Education, 2010), Hispanics continue to lag behind in almost every measure of educational attainment. At a time when America is losing ground to other countries in terms of academic achievement and economic competitiveness, there is no better time than the present to mobilize the human assets that Hispanics represent in order to restore and maintain the nation’s prosperity.

The education of Hispanic students in the United States has reached a crisis stage (Hart, 2006; Landgraf, 2008; Petersen & Assanie, 2005; The National Association for Hispanic Education, 2010). Although the number of Hispanic students attending public
schools has increased dramatically in recent decades, Hispanic students, as a group, have the lowest level of education and the highest dropout rate of any group of students (Pew Hispanic Center, 2005).

Conditions of poverty and health, as well as other social problems, have made it difficult for Hispanics living in the United States to improve their educational status. Coincidentally, one of the most pressing national educational priorities has been to close the achievement gap between Hispanic and White students (United States Department of Education, 2000). But yet, Hispanic students continue to fail at alarming rates (National Association for Hispanic Education, 2010).

Furthermore, the seriousness of the educational plight of Hispanic students from disadvantaged backgrounds underscores the urgency of developing a solid knowledge base of awareness on the effective teaching characteristics, learning characteristics, and personal development characteristics which focus on alterable practices which may improve the academic achievement of Hispanic students. Improving the education of Hispanic students, however, will take more than just an awareness of the problems and knowing of solutions. It will most likely take a reconstruction of the total educational system (Schneider, Martinez, & Owens, 2006).

Clearly having the knowledge, data, and widespread consensus that Hispanic students are less likely to graduate from high school than any other demographic group, there is still considerable disagreement about the measurement of secondary school dropout rates (The National Association for Hispanic Education, 2010). Despite improvements in the Hispanic graduation rate, in 2001 the dropout rate of Hispanics was
more than double that of African Americans and Whites (Schneider, Martinez, & Owens, 2006).

Weak assistance for Hispanic students in secondary schools further exacerbates Hispanics’ lower rate of graduation and the probability of not completing advanced math and science courses, both of which are important predictors of college attendance and success (Bellessa-Frost, 2006). The Pew Hispanic Center (2005) reported that in 2000, only 31 percent of Hispanic high school graduates completed calculus, trigonometry, or other advanced math courses, and just over half completed advanced science courses. Taking advanced math and science courses is a powerful predictor of college enrollment and an even greater prediction of college success (Schneider, et al, 2006).

Without doubt, there is a need to create and sustain a robust educational momentum throughout the educational system – from ensuring high-quality teachers in K – 12 schools, to helping Hispanic families navigate the college application and financial aid maze. However, merely helping families navigate the college application and financial aid maze may not be enough. There needs to be targeted efforts in strengthening the overall educational pipeline for Hispanic students.

Strengthening the pipeline to college and beyond for Hispanic students will require far more than bringing in the cavalry during high school and offering special college-access programs to inspire, prepare, and guide them into college. And, moving them into the math and science pipeline will require an even broader strategy that extends beyond those disciplines to pre-literacy skills (Steinberg, 2010).

Some researchers (Chacon, 2000; Reese, 2002; Evans, 2000) argue that neural patterns established in the highly sensitive early years of life may be impossible to
modify with any of the interventions devised to date. Others (Steinberg, 2010; Evans, 2000; Schneider, et al, 2006) are more optimistic about the plasticity of the human brain and argue that intensive intervention can change the course of development. No one, however, argues that such a thing cannot be accomplished without significant investment of resources.

Improving the education of Hispanic students will require the concerted efforts of all educators to respond to the crisis by insisting on immediate attention and accepting no more excuses (United States Department of Education, 1998). It will require a call to action and collaboration among teachers and administrators, university professors, deans, and presidents; and, parents and students. The development will also require a change in attitudes to make educators aware of the severity of the problems facing Hispanic students and seriously commit to reversing the cycle of educational failure that Hispanic students have unjustifiably endured.

Hispanics in Agricultural Education

Clearly, the national picture is dismal. The demographical data for agricultural education parallels the national data. Within agricultural education, only a small proportion of students are engaged in agricultural education. The National Council for Agricultural Education (2000), in *Reinventing Agricultural Education for the Year 2020*, found that only six percent of the high school population completed coursework in agriculture. If the national picture is that only six percent of the high school population is studying agriculture, then the percent for Hispanic students must be much, much lower than one percent.
However, the National Research Council (1988) proclaimed that agriculture was a topic too important to be taught to only a relatively small percentage of students. Therefore, it is without mystery that millions of students each year, from all ethnicities, are missing out on the numerous benefits provided through agricultural education.

Gliem and Gliem (2000) compared White and non-White agricultural education students and found that there were significantly fewer Asians, African Americans, and Hispanics. It has also been reported that students of color view agricultural careers as incompatible because they have negative perceptions of agricultural education and the agricultural industry in general (Jones & Bowen, 1998; Talbert & Larke, 1995; Gliem & Gliem, 2000).

Furthermore, Gliem and Gliem (2000) identified factors that encouraged, discouraged, and would encourage secondary agricultural education students to enroll in agricultural education classes. The main reason potential students indicated that they did not enroll in agricultural education classes was the negative image they held of agriculture, while students would enroll if they believed that agricultural education provided experiences that would eventually lead to good jobs (Gliem & Gliem, 2000).

Talbert and Balschweid (2004) determined that those who did enroll in agricultural education reported that the courses were exciting, interesting, and beneficial for their future plans. Those who did not enroll in agricultural education classes were in total contrast to the reported indicators of those who did enroll (Talbert & Balschweid, 2004).

Non-enrolled students questioned the importance of enrolling in Agricultural Education and their top reason for not enrolling was lack of interest, followed by the
amount of time needed to commit was excessive (Talbert & Balschweid, 2004). However in the case of those students who did enroll in the Agricultural Education program, it was reported that the agricultural education teacher was their greatest influence.

In regards to extra curricular activities, Brown and Evans (2002) found that Hispanic students participated in fewer extracurricular activities than their non-Hispanic counterparts, and consequently, were less connected to their schools. Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder (2001) reported that students who attended a school with a greater proportion of students of their own race – ethnicity, were more attached to the school, but that the same characteristic did not affect student engagement. Basically, no matter what the school demographic composition is like, students of minority groups are not likely to become engaged in school activities (Johnson, Crosnoe, &Elder, 2001).

Faircloth and Hamm (2005) reported that participation in extracurricular activities for Hispanic students was affected by peer perceptions. In addition, Faircloth and Hamm (2005) reported that the teacher – student relationship impacted Hispanic engagement and that finding was consistent with the finding from Talbert and Balschweid (2004). Conchas (2001) concluded that Hispanic engagement could vary for specific academic programs within a school. Conchas further concluded that the differences in engagement were attributed to cultural and institutional processes within each program.

In summary, Jones (1998) reported that Hispanic students could be attracted to agriculture through a series of interventions. However, Jones failed to provide a list of what those interactions could look like. Clearly, Agricultural Education has provided many benefits for students enrolled in the program, however underrepresented minorities
are not gaining from those benefits. In order for Agricultural Education to grow and enhance the quality of programs, the student body must resemble the diversity of this country, of local communities, and of individual schools.

**Instructional Practices Used with Hispanic Students**

Some educators have argued that the most serious barriers to achievement among Hispanic students has been the lack of funding for programs that address their educational needs, or political opposition to programs that focus mostly on linguistics (Melendez, 1993). However, there are other alternative factors that have been found to contribute to the underachievement of Hispanic students. The top three critical factors found (Padron, Waxman, & Rivera, 2002) to contribute to the underachievement of Hispanic students are the lack of qualified teachers to teach them, inappropriate instructional practices, and at-risk school environments.

At a time when the United States is falling behind other nations in math and science (Landgraf, 2008), the untapping of Hispanic students’ intellectual potential in math and science is inexcusable. The nation’s estimated 44 million Hispanics represent one-seventh of the population, with a growth rate more than three times the population as a whole (United States Bureau of the Census, 2000). Like Americans in general, Hispanics recognize the important role that education plays in contributing to our nation’s achievements, and Hispanics are concerned about their ability to remain competitive unless our schools improve and challenge students further (Hart, 2006).

In general, research (Arias, 2000; Berry, 2003; Chacon, 2000; Calderon, 1999) has shown that there is a disparity between how teachers teach course material and how Hispanic students generally learn. Traditionally, Hispanic students have had a mentor at
home that helped a student withstand peer, economic, and societal pressures (ERIC Clearing House on Urban Education, 2000). In addition, Hispanic students are taught at home via observation and practice and cooperative learning (Steinberg, 2010).

Furthermore, Hispanic students generally have a predominance of extended family that is absolutely essential in promoting a student’s success (Keller, 2005). Research has emphasized the importance of understanding the impact that cultural factors have on Hispanic students’ academic success (Padron, Waxman, & Rivera, 2002).

In an in-depth study that examined the disparity between teaching and learning for various ethnic groups, Berry (2003) suggested that there was a significant discrepancy in how teachers teach and how “ethnically diverse” students actually learned. More notably, Berry (2003) suggested that instructional approaches used by teachers may be in direct opposition to how diverse cultures prefer to learn, thus hampering effective teaching and learning.

The most common instructional approach found in schools that predominately serve Hispanic students has been the direct-instructional model. In the direct-instructional model, teachers typically teach to the whole class at the same time and control all of the classroom discussion and decision-making (Haberman, 1991).

The direct-instruction model emphasizes lecture, drill and practice, remediation, and student seatwork, consisting of mainly worksheets (Stephen, Varble, & Taitt, 1993). Some researchers (Haberman, 1991; Waxman, Huang, & Padron, 1995) argue that these instructional practices amount to a “pedagogy of poverty,” because the instructional practices focus on low-level skills and passive instruction.
Several studies (Padron & Waxman, 1993; Waxman, Huang, & Padron, 1995; Rivera & Zehler, 1991) have examined classroom instruction for Hispanic students and found that the pedagogy of poverty orientation exists in many classrooms with heavy Hispanic enrollment. In a large study investigating the classroom instruction of 90 teachers from 16 inner-city middle schools serving predominately Hispanic students, Waxman, Huang, and Padron (1995) found that students were typically involved in whole-class instruction, which allowed little time for interaction with the teacher or other students.

About two-thirds of the times, for example, Hispanic students were not engaged in verbal interaction with either their teacher or other students. Students rarely selected their own instructional activities and were generally very passive in the classroom, often just watching or listening to their teacher, even though the Hispanic students were found to be on task about 94% of the time.

In another study examining mathematics and science instruction in inner-city middle-school classrooms serving predominately Hispanic students, Padron and Waxman (1993) found that science teachers participated in whole-class instruction about 93% of the time, while mathematics teachers participated in whole-class instruction about 55% of the time. Students in mathematics classes worked independently about 45% of the time, while there was no independent work observed in the science classes.

In the mathematics classes, no small group learning was observed. In the science classes, students worked in small groups only 7% of the time. Questions about complex issues were not raised by any of the mathematics or science teachers. Furthermore,
teachers seldom (4% of the time) asked open-ended questions for students in science classes and never asked open-ended questions in the mathematics classes.

The results of these and other studies illustrate that the classroom instruction in schools comprised predominately by Hispanic students often tend to be whole-class instruction with students working in teacher-assigned and teacher-generated activities, and generally in a passive manner. In the observed classrooms, teachers also spent more time explaining things to students than questioning, cueing, or prompting them to respond.

Teachers were not frequently observed encouraging extended student responses to encouraging students to help themselves or each other. Talbert and Balschweid (2004) noted that the students learned best when instruction was immediately relevant and suggested that content should be provided in multiple formats that engaged the learner in meaningful ways.

An examination of the efficacy of matching learning style to teaching style was investigated by Reese (2002). Reese concluded that Hispanic students could be assisted with improved levels of concentration, processing, and retention of new and difficult material when the instructional method was matched with how the students preferred to learn. Reese (2002) proposed that a solution that could be considered by teachers was to utilize “active learning strategies” in the classroom. From previous research, McConnell (1996) reported that active learning in the classroom got students more involved in the classroom activities, rather than passively listening to the lecture, and allowed students to synthesize information more readily.
In summary, research has suggested that inappropriate instructional practices of pedagogical-induced learning problems may account for some of the poor academic performance and low motivation of many Hispanic students (Fletcher & Cardona-Morales, 1990). Furthermore, based on this brief review of the literature, it can be concluded that teachers may need to make pedagogical adaptations to address Hispanic students’ needs.

School Effects Literature

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), young people (students) need to have adults (teachers) who are "crazy" about them. Unfortunately, in our most troubled schools, teachers are not crazy about students, and students are not crazy about teachers -- instead, they are driving each other crazy. In these troubled schools, support networks are weak or nonexistent for both students and teachers. Teachers may resent what they perceive as inadequate encouragement, assistance, and resources to do their job. Students may perceive that nobody at school knows or cares about them.

What can be done to change these schools into caring, productive places that students and teachers enjoy coming to every day? The school effects literature describes numerous factors that may enhance the school environment, including effective principal leadership, a safe and orderly setting, engaging extracurricular activities, reductions in the size and impersonality of schools, and educational programs designed to fit the unique needs of specific students and school contexts (Clayton, 2002; Griggs & Dunn, 1995; Jordanov, 2001; Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) promoted a paradigm shift that addressed the concerns of student development and educational success in the context of the family and the
surrounding ecology that could aptly be applied to issues related to the limited academic success of Hispanic students. The term “at-risk school environment” suggests that it is the school, rather than the individual student, that should be considered at-risk.

By attending schools that are poorly maintained, in addition to having teachers who are not qualified or use inappropriate instructional approaches, Hispanic students are learning in a school environment that can at best, be qualified as at-risk. Alternative strategies or approaches for reforming schools calls for changing the circumstances under which students attend school, rather than changing the students. Educators have begun to argue that school systems, school programs, and organizational and institutional features of the school environment contribute to the conditions that influence students’ academic success or failure (Kagan, 1990; Waxman, 1992; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989).

Several studies have found that many features of schools and classrooms are alienating, and consequently, driving students out of school rather than keeping them engaged (Kagan, 1990; Newman, 1989). Sinclair and Ghory (1987) maintained that it was the school environment that either encouraged or discouraged student learning. A compilation of the research (Waxman, 1992; Clayton, 2002; Griggs & Dunn, 1995; Jordanov, 2001; Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999; Kagan, 1990; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989; Brofenbrenner, 1979) identified several characteristics of an “at-risk” environment, including:

- Alienation of students and teachers,
- Inferior standards and low quality of education,
- Low expectations of students,
• High non-completion rates for students
• Classroom practices which were unresponsive to students’ learning needs,
• High truancy and disciplinary problems, and
• Inadequate preparation of students for the future.

In summary, Hispanic students who attend the at-risk schools merit special attention because if the learning environment can be altered, it may be possible to improve both their education and their overall chances for success in society (Newman, 1989; Waxman, 1992). Perhaps by altering at-risk schools, Hispanic students may then enjoy the right afforded to them, the right of an education.

Summary

The ethnic and racial composition of the population of the United States is changing and the national trend of an increasing Hispanic population is an even greater concern across all of America. Up until the progress of the past few years, the state of Hispanic education had not changed substantially for decades. However, the education of Hispanic students in the United States has reached a crisis stage. Coincidentally, one of the most pressing national educational priorities has been to close the achievement gap between Hispanic students and White students (United States Department of Education, 2000).

The Pew Hispanic Center (2005) reported that only 31 percent of Hispanic high school graduates completed calculus, trigonometry, or other advanced math course, and just over half completed some type of advanced science course. Taking advanced math and science courses is a powerful predictor of college enrollment, and an even greater predictor of college success (Schneider, et al, 2006).
Therefore, there is a need to sustain a robust educational momentum throughout the educational system in an effort to not only enroll Hispanic students, especially in secondary and post-secondary education, but there exists a greater need to not only enroll, but to graduate college ready Hispanic students. Improving the education of Hispanic students will require the concerted efforts of all educators to respond to the crisis by insisting on immediate attention and accepting no more excuses!
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

A description of the research methodology and procedures in this study is the primary focus of chapter three. In this chapter is a presentation of the research objectives, research design, the population and subject selection, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Prior to the data collection stage of this research, but after the development of the focus group discussion questions, the researcher submitted a plan outlining the details of the research study and all related material to The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Initiation of the data collection followed receipt of “exempted” approval from the IRB, approval number 2012E0260.

Problem Statement

The education of Hispanic students in the United States has reached a critical stage. Although the number of Hispanic students attending public schools has increased dramatically in recent decades, Hispanic students, as a group, have the lowest level of education and the highest dropout rate of any group of students.

The National Council for Agricultural Education’s proclamation stands in contrast to the assertion made by the National Research Council (1988) that agriculture was a topic too important to be taught to only a small percentage of students.
Millions of students each year, from all ethnicities, are missing out on numerous benefits provided through agricultural education. In order for agricultural education to grow and be able to enhance the quality of courses and programs, the participants must resemble the overall student body. However, the problem is that it is not known which specific characteristics and environmental conditions are perceived to encourage or prohibit Hispanic students from enrolling in agricultural education programs and participating in agricultural education activities.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify what specific characteristics and environmental conditions were perceived to encourage or prohibit Hispanic students from enrolling in Agricultural Education programs and participating in Agricultural Education activities.

**Research Questions**

The following research objectives were developed to guide the study:

1. Describe what made the students decide to enroll in Agricultural Education classes.
2. Describe what the students’ families and friends say about the students enrolling in Agricultural Education classes.
3. Describe what the student’s think other teachers are saying about the Agricultural Education program.
4. Describe the students’ perception of participating in Agricultural Education activities, and whether or not they believe that they are accepted by the other people participating in the activity.
5. Identify what could be done to make everyone feel more accepted in Agricultural Education and activities.

**Research Design**

This qualitative study utilized descriptive and casual-comparative research methods. Descriptive research is a type of research that consists of “a set of concepts and methods used in organizing, summarizing, tabulating, depicting, and describing collections of data” (Shavelson, 1996, p.8). Ary, Jacobs, and Razaveih (2006) explained that descriptive research “uses instruments such as questionnaires and interviews to gather information from groups of subjects” (p. 31).

Casual-comparative research, or expo facto, is a correlational research design that investigates potential relationships between variables of interest. This type of research is conducted to attempt to determine the reasons, or causes, for an existing condition in a group or individual. Correlational research designs "seek to examine the strength and direction of relationships among two or more variables" (Ary, Jacobs, & Razaveih, 2006, pp 29-30).

**Population and Subject Selection**

The target population for this study was Hispanic students from Coronado High School, El Paso, Texas, enrolled in an agricultural education program, which has a 74% Hispanic enrollment in the school. There were three teachers of agricultural education at Coronado High School. One teacher teaches the Production Agriculture / Agricultural Business curriculum, a second teacher teaches the horticulture curriculum, and the third teacher teaches Agricultural Mechanics.
Coronado High School is classified as a large city public high school in the El Paso Independent School District, El Paso, Texas. The total student enrollment for the 2009-2010 school year at Coronado High School was 2,604 total students. The student enrollment by grade level is made up of 887 freshman (34.0%), 589 sophomores (22.6%), 609 juniors (23.3%), and 519 (19.9%) seniors. Of those 2,604 students at Coronado High School, six students are American Indian/Alaskan (0.2%), 76 Asian/Pacific Islander (2.9%), 36 Black (1.3%), 1,927 Hispanic (74.0%), and 559 White (21.4%). The student enrollment consists of 1,286 males (49.3%) and 1,318 females (50.6%).

The Production Agriculture / Agricultural Business classroom was selected for inclusion in the study for several reasons. First, the Production Agriculture / Agricultural Business program at Coronado High School has the largest enrollment of students when compared to the Horticulture and Agricultural Mechanics programs. Secondly, as the methodology for the study was qualitative in nature and required the use of focus groups, a manageable size of participants was necessary, thus only one program (Production Agriculture / Agricultural Business) at Coronado High School was used. The third reason for selecting the Production Agriculture / Agricultural Business program was that the academic adviser to the researcher had personal connections to the teacher, thus securing the necessary permission and access to the classroom.

There were 112 students enrolled in the Agriculture Production / Agricultural Business program at Coronado High School. Of these 112 students, 106 were Hispanic students (94.6%). The grade levels of the students were 38 freshmen (9th grade) (33.9%), 27 sophomores (10th grade) (24.1%), 25 juniors (11th grade) (22.3%), and 22 seniors (12th grade) (19.6%).
Prior to the day of data collection, each student was provided a “Parental Permission Slip” which was required for participation. There were 110 permission slips returned to the classroom teacher, and thus the accessible sample was 110 students, yielding a 98.2% response rate. Of these 110 students who returned a permission slip, 100 were Hispanic students (90.9%). The grade levels of the students were 37 freshmen (9th grade) (33.6%), 26 sophomores (10th grade) (23.6%), 25 juniors (11th grade) (22.7%), and 22 seniors (12th grade) (20.0%).

Because the sample of students in the study was not of adult age, interactions between the data collectors and the students was monitored and supervised by the agricultural education teacher at Coronado High School. In addition, because the research was not experimental in nature, the teacher at Coronado High School was able to float between the focus groups to ensure compliance to all policies on behalf of the school.

**Instrumentation**

A set of researcher-developed questions was used to collect the data guided by the research objectives. Within each Agriculture Production / Agricultural Business class (5 total classes), the students were broken into small groups ranging between six (6) and eight (8) students and the researcher-developed questions were used as a method to guide the discussion of the focus groups in the direction of the research questions.

As stated, focus groups were utilized to gather information about what specific characteristics and environmental conditions were perceived to encourage or prohibit Hispanic students from enrolling in agricultural education programs and participating in agricultural education activities. Focus groups are group interviews in which a moderator
guides the interview while a small group discusses the topics that the interviewer raises. Focus groups are fundamentally a way of listening to people and learning from them. What the participants in the group say during their discussions are the essential data in focus groups (Morgan, 1998).

Focus groups are, above all, a qualitative research method. As such, they use guided group discussions to generate a rich understanding of participants’ experiences and beliefs. Qualitative methods are especially useful for exploration and discovery, and focus groups are frequently used to learn about either topics or groups of people that are poorly understood. Qualitative methods also excel at interpretation – giving an understanding of why things are the way they are and how they got to be that way (Morgan, 1998).

All techniques for gathering information have limits, and focus groups are no exception. Among the limitations, focus group interviews allow participants to influence and interact with each other, and as a result, group members are able to influence the course of the discussion. This results in some inefficiencies such as detours in the discussion and the raising of irrelevant issues, thus requiring the moderator to keep the discussion focused (Krueger, 1998).

Second, focus group data are more difficult to analyze. Group interaction provides a social environment, and comments must be interpreted within that context. Care must also be taken to avoid lifting comments out of context and out of sequence (Krueger, 1998).

The final limitation is that the focus group techniques require carefully trained interviewers. Techniques, such as pauses and probes, and knowing when and how to
move into a new topic area, require a degree of expertise typically not possessed by untrained interviewers (Krueger, 1998).

Despite the limitations concerning focus groups, there are several advantages of utilizing focus group methodology to explore what specific characteristics and environmental conditions are perceived to encourage or prohibit Hispanic students from enrolling in agricultural education programs and participating in agricultural education activities. First, focus group interviews are a socially oriented research procedure and people are social creatures who interact with each other.

The respondents are influenced by the comments of others and make decisions after listening to the advice of people around them. Focus groups place people in real life situations as opposed to the controlled experimental situations typical of quantitative studies. In addition, inhibitors are often relaxed in a group situation. The more natural the environment tends to be, there tends to be an increase in prompts and candor by the respondents (Krueger, 1998).

Although the data obtained in group interviews can be influenced by social desirability (Krueger, 1998), youth’s experiences in organized activities often emerge and are given voice through interactions with others. Thus the dynamic of focus groups are well suited to eliciting young people’s accounts of the variety of negative experiences they encounter in this context (Dworkin & Larson, 2007).

In addition, focus group discussions have the advantage of allowing the moderator to probe. The flexibility to explore issues is not possible with the structured questioning sequence of survey research (Krueger, 1998).
Furthermore, focus group interviews have high face validity. The technique is easily understood and the results can seem believable to those using the information. Results are not represented in complicated statistical charts, but rather in lay terminology (Krueger, 1998).

Thus, focus group methodology was selected for the current study because focus groups are useful in learning about topics that are poorly understood. In short, the depth of information gathered was more important than the breadth. Unlike survey results, focus group methodology provides flexibility. Finally, focus groups provide interaction with other individuals, and youths’ experiences in organizations often emerge and are given voice through interactions with others.

**Measurement Error**

In social science research, the researcher must make a conscious effort to minimize measurement error. Measurement error can never be eliminated; however, by recognizing that both random and systematic error exists, error can be reduced. The following sections outline the steps taken to minimize measurement error by addressing issues of validity and reliability.

**Validity of Questionnaire**

Validity, as described by Shavelson (1996), is “the extent to which the interpretation of the results of the study follows from the study itself and the extent to which the results may be generalized to other situations with other people” (p. 19). The most basic type of validity is face validity – do the research questions look valid. Typically focus groups have high face validity, which is due in large part to the believability of comments from participants. People open up in focus groups and share
insight that might not be available from individual interviews, questionnaires, or other
data collection sources.

**Evidence of Validity**

The initial focus group questions were developed during a focus group meeting at
the University of Kentucky. Originally the questionnaire consisted of 17 questions that
were decided upon during the focus group. In order to establish the aforementioned face
validity, the questions were then reviewed by other experts in related fields to determine
appropriate content and structure. After the peer review process and taking
recommendations into consideration, the questions to lead the focus group were cut down
from 17 to five. External validity, the degree to which the results of a study can be
generalized, was not a major concern, as generalizability is typically not a goal of studies
employing focus group methodology.

The original focus group panel of experts consisted of six university faculty
members and graduate students representing the Department of Agricultural
Communication, Education, and Leadership from The Ohio State University, and from
the Department of Community & Leadership Development from the University of
Kentucky. Two of the members of the panel were Agricultural Education faculty
members (one from each university), the remaining four were graduate students (two
from each university) with knowledge and experience in the fields of the agricultural
education, research, and statistics.

**Reliability of the Questionnaire**

Reliability is referred to as “the consistency or dependability of a behavioral
measurement” (Shavelson, 1996, p. 473). Although it is difficult to create, design, and
efficiently utilize a measure that is perfectly reliable, a researcher should put forth efforts in ensuring that the questionnaire is reliable.

**Evidence of Reliability**

Reliability is the extent to which a measure (such as a focus group) is accurate and replicable. With focus groups, this could concern whether another focus group, of similar but different people, would give similar answers. Focus groups often have problems with reliability. Problems with reliability can be lessened if the moderator is highly trained and if questions are relatively specific.

For the current study, the three focus group interviewers practiced the focus group questions together on several occasions in an effort to increase intra-rater and inter-rater reliability. Each focus group interviewer was clear on the intent of each focus group question and was prepped for any follow-up questions if time was allowed.

**Data Collection**

Data collection was conducted via focus group interviews conducted in the Agriculture Production / Agricultural Business classroom at Coronado High School, El Paso, Texas. Upon arrival of the students to the agricultural education classroom, the classroom instructor gave a brief overview of the data collection process. Students were then randomly divided into three groups of students ranging between six (6) and eight (8) students. Each individual group of students was moved to a location in the classroom or an adjacent office which would allow for the focus group interview to proceed without distractions.
There were approximately 35 minutes allocated for each focus group session for the interviews. The focus group session began with the interviewer introducing him or herself, followed by the students introducing themselves to the interviewer using first names only, and then the interviewer proceeded with the first of five pre-established focus group questions. Each student in each group was provided the opportunity to respond to each of the five pre-established questions. Following the five pre-established questions, the interviewer asked the group as a whole if there were any lingering thoughts or comments. Those lingering thoughts and comments are considered part of the data.

Data Analysis

As soon as a focus group interview concluded, the researcher running said focus group checked the audio recording to ensure proper operation. The researchers also talked about the focus group that had just concluded, discussing topics such as the most important themes and ideas discussed, any unexpected or unanticipated findings, and the things that should be done differently for the next focus groups.

Audio tapes were utilized to record each of the focus group sessions. Tapes were transcribed by recording verbatim how each participant responded to each question. The researchers were the only ones who had access to the original recordings.

In order to analyze the data, the process of triangulation was employed. The researcher and his fellow focus group interviewers met at the conclusion of each focus group session and discussed any trends or major issues that arose during the proceeding focus group interview. The research took notes relative to the identified trends and issue from each post focus group interview.
Next, the researcher listened to each tape from each focus group interview and again identified any trends and or major issues. The newly identified trends and issues from the listening of each focus group interview tape was then compared to the previously written list of trends and issues from the informal post-interview feedback sessions held the day of the focus group sessions with the focus group interviewers.

Therefore, for each question in each of the focus groups, major themes, minor themes, and unique responses were identified. After each focus group transcript had been analyzed, an overall analysis was performed for each question by identifying major themes, minor themes, and unique responses for all focus groups combined.

Finally, after the focus group interview tapes were transcribed, the researcher again identified the trends and major issues, and again compared that newly created list to the previous two existing lists. Finally, the transcripts were reviewed for any common themes across the responses to all interview questions.

The overall goal of this research was that after the data were collected and the researchers analyzed the data to identify common responses and perceptions from Hispanic students across various focus group sessions, that a quantifiable type of instrument would be developed for future research use. The instrument to be designed will allow future researchers to collect more usable data and start identifying what creates and maintains the barriers that are keeping Hispanic students from enrolling and participating in agricultural education programs and activities. The identification of these perceived barriers which are potentially creating issues will allow for an opportunity to move agricultural education programs and activities in a direction that allows their
student body to resemble the diversity of this country, of local communities, and of individual schools.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The findings reported here are based on focus groups with a total of 110 students enrolled in the Agriculture Education program at Coronado High School in El Paso, Texas. These students ranged from freshmen to seniors, and had varying numbers of years of enrollment in the Agricultural Education program. Students were encouraged to be open and honest, and were assured that there were no right or no wrong answers. The students were informed that it was their thoughts and perceptions that the researchers were there to determine.

Chapter 4 answer each of the research questions by presenting the research question that was used to lead the focus group discussions. Themes that emerged from the focus groups are presented under the appropriate research question. Finally, common themes across responses were identified.

Findings Relative to the Problem

Research Question #1: What made you decide to enroll in Agricultural Education classes?

Students were asked to discuss what had made them decide to enroll in Agricultural Education classes. Students stated numerous reasons for their enrollment in Agricultural Education classes. Throughout the various focus groups, the majority of the responses fell into one of three general categories: (a) family involvement in agriculture
or an agricultural education program, (b) personal interest, and (c) suggested or placed by guidance counselors.

Family Involvement in Agriculture or an Agricultural Education Program

There were numerous students who stated that their enrollment in the Agricultural Education program was directly influenced by their family’s involvement in an agriculturally related field. Family involvement ranged from parents and grandparents that are ranchers, individuals whose sibling was a veterinarian, to having a grandfather who was a blacksmith. One of the students stated:

*My big brother was in the Ag program here at Coronado. He always seemed to enjoy it, and he went to college and is a vet now. It was nice to see that you could go into agriculture and be something other than a cowboy. I guess once I thought about it, it made sense, but before I never would have known that taking “Ag” classes in high school was what you should do if you were interested in being a vet. I would have guesses biology or something like that. I have a similar love for animals that my big brother does, so its cool to have someone who is a positive role model to show me that you can be successful and happy doing what you really enjoy.*

Another student stated that his grandfather was a blacksmith and was still running a family business at 65 years old. It is this student’s intention to take as many of the Agricultural Education classes, especially the Agricultural Mechanics classes like welding, since what he would learn in the classes was going to be applicable to what he
wanted to do for a career. The student indicated that he had no interest in attending college. The student further stated that a career in a skilled-trade was what the Agricultural Education classes were preparing him for.

**Personal Interest**

Many of the students indicated that it was strictly a personal interest that led them to enroll in the Agricultural Education program. The most common interest that appeared throughout almost every focus group was an interest in becoming a veterinarian. There were several career paths that the students described an interest in pursuing. Some students wanted to go straight through college and get their doctorate of veterinary medicine, and others who expressed an interest in becoming a veterinary technician first, then work their way to becoming a veterinarian. One of the students shared her interest by saying:

*I want to be a vet, well, at some point I think. I know I want to do something with animals; that much I am sure of. It would probably be the smartest thing to do to just to go to college and do whatever you have to do to become a vet, but honestly I don’t really like school all that much. Well, I don’t like regular school, the ag classes are where the other people with similar interests as me are, so that definitely is why I came. Coming here is the only part of the day that I look forward to. Maybe I will get my vet tech degree first, since that is shorter, then I can work at a vet’s office and maybe they will pay for me to go get a higher degree.*
One student revealed that she already worked as an assistant at a veterinarian’s office, and volunteered at an animal shelter. She indicated that she would like to one day become a veterinarian, but was in no hurry. The path which she describes that she sees for her future was to go to school and get a veterinarian technician degree and work part-time, then continue with her education after she secures a position that affords her to pay off her student loans while paying for classes with the end goal being a veterinarian and not having much, if any, debt from school.

*Suggested or Placed by Guidance Counselor*

The third common response given in the focus groups was that the students were not there by choice, but rather they had been guided or directed by a counselor to enroll. There were several students who indicated that they did not necessarily like being in the Agricultural Education classes, but they did not feel that they were any worse off there than in the general education classes. One student, who had recently relocated from Chicago with her parents stated:

*There wasn’t anything like this at my last school. When I came here to Coronado and met with the guidance counselors, they were telling me about my different options and the Agricultural Education classes sounded kind of neat. I’m taking a horticulture class too, and I really like that. I’m not sure if agriculture or something like that is anything I would be interested in doing for the rest of my life, but its pretty interesting and fun right now. I’m not nearly as bored in these classes as I am or was in all the rest of them.*
Another rather large group of students indicated that they were unclear as to why they were enrolled in the Agricultural Education classes. It was a common response that they had just been told to take the classes, or that they were enrolled without them even knowing what the classes were or where they were held. One student stated that he was not even aware that the Agricultural Education buildings existed. The student said that if he had not been placed in the Agricultural Education classes, that he would have graduated after attending four years of high school and never know anything about the option of taking the Agricultural Education classes.

**Research Question #2: What do your family and friends say about you taking Agricultural Education classes?**

The students were next asked what they think their family and friends say about them taking Agricultural Education classes. The responses to this focus group question in regard to the family were overwhelmingly positive. When indicating the perceptions of their friends, the responses became a little more mixed.

*Family*

Of the 110 students in the focus groups, 103 stated that their family’s (mainly parent or guardians) perception of them being enrolled in the ‘Agricultural Education classes was a good thing. Some of the numerous benefits that the students’ believed their family envisioned from their enrollment in Agricultural Education classes included the possibility of securing scholarships for college, learning a skilled trade, being involved and active in a program that other family members were a part of, and gaining valuable knowledge that would come in useful on the family farm or in the family business.
One student whose parents and older siblings were involved in Agricultural Education classes and program in high school shared that:

Once I hit the terrible teenage years, my family and I didn’t really get along all that well. They were interested in their thing, and I was interested in mine, and they definitely were not the same things. I made some bad choices here and there, but I have to say that enrolling in the agriculture programs, mainly to be with my best friend, was a life-changing event and easily one of the best choices I ever made. Being involved in the ag classes and FFA ended up occupying a lot of the free time that I had before, which is when I would make those bad decisions I mentioned a minute ago. It also totally changed the family dynamics at home too. Now that I have something in common with my parents, I actually enjoy sitting around talking ag with them and listening to them reminisce about the “good ole days” when they were in FFA. Who would have thought, right?

Friends

When talking about their friends, the responses were mixed. Many individuals stated that their friends were the other students enrolled in the Agricultural Education classes. Others felt that the other students had a stereotypical view of the Agricultural Education program and the students who were enrolled in the program. One student spoke of a conversation he had with a “non-ag” friend. He commented:
So I told my buddy last year that I was taking the ag classes this year. He was like “really, I didn’t know you owned a cowboy hat and big belt buckle.” That’s exactly what I think the normal thoughts are around here. I’m not taking the classes because I want to be a cowboy, I want to work construction and the stuff like welding and using the torches and stuff around here will definitely help with that more than you know some other stupid class.

This theme of the perception of “cowboy hats, big belt buckles, and tight jeans,” repeatedly came up throughout the majority of the focus groups. Many of the students attributed this perception to the fact that they believed that the other students and their friends didn’t really understand the Agricultural Education classes and what all they entailed.

Research Question #3: What do you think other teachers are saying about the agriculture program?

Students were then asked what they think the other teachers say about the Agricultural Education program. Few of the students responded that the other teachers in the school had a positive perception of the Agricultural Education classes. Those that did report positive perceptions did not elect to elaborate any further than simply stating that they think some of the other teachers believe it’s a good opportunity.

The vast majority of the responses were that most of the other teachers and staff had no idea about the Agricultural Education classes. Several students reported that they were also active in sports, and that often times participating in Agricultural Education activities was not an acceptable excuse for missing practice, when other activities were
excused. There was a pair of students who had been working on a project for their Agricultural Education class who shared this situation:

So we went over to the library to look some stuff up for our report, right. When we got there and one of the librarians asked if she could help us, she was shocked when we told her what we were doing. She said that she had been a librarian at the school for 26 years, that she knew those buildings were up there by the football field, but she had no idea that Coronado offered Agricultural Education classes. 26 years, and seriously, the library is right over there, if you stand up on the desk you can see it out the window probably. That’s messed up.

Other students told of similar situations with other teachers and staff members.

A common remark that was made was that many of the students in the focus group believed that the Agricultural Education classes were used as a “dumping ground” or filler class. This comment came from both students who had willingly elected to enroll in the Agricultural Education classes as well as those students that were placed there by the guidance counselors. One student who had been placed there said:

I don’t know why I’m here. Well, I guess that’s not true, I do know why I’m here, they think I’m dumb. This is where the dumb kids get sent when there is nowhere else to send them. The lady told me that I was going to end up not graduating if I stayed in the regular classes. She said this was my best option because they really didn’t do anything up here and it was an easy A as long as I
came to school. Funny thing is, I’m really not that stupid, I just don’t like school because it’s boring. Another funny thing is that that lady was way wrong about what they do up here, I mean look around we get to build stuff and make stuff, use welders and power tools and everything. When is the last time you played with power tools in an English class?

A large portion of the students, both willingly enrolled and placed, seemed very disgusted and upset by the fact that the other teachers and staff at the school had such a poor perception, if any perception at all, of the Agricultural Education classes and program.

Research Question #4: When you participate in agricultural education activities, do you feel you are accepted by other people participating in the same activity?

The students were then asked when they participate in agricultural education activities, do they feel they are accepted by the other participants in the activities, and what made them respond to the question the way they did. The responses were very limited to this question. Few of the students participated in activities outside of Coronado High School. Reasons the students gave for not participating in agricultural activities included sports, volunteering, work, no time, and many were just not interested.

Those that had participated in activities believed that students from other schools accepted them. While they believed that the other students accepted them because they were all participating in the same activity, the amount of time that they were exposed to and interacting with the other students was very limited. One of the students told of her participation in a skills team competition saying:
It was pretty fun doing the skills competition, and what little interaction we had with the other school was pretty much competitively based, but it was a friendly sort of competitive. When we weren’t competing, and had time to socialize, we stayed with the people from our school mostly. There were a couple kids that knew other students from other schools, but after an introduction, those two talked and everyone else just went back to whom they were talking to before. It’s an open and accepting environment, there just doesn’t seem to be a lot of intermixing, if that’s even a real word.

Those students who had participated in activities named events that they had participated in such as public speaking, livestock judging, mechanics team, FFA Week, and the aforementioned skills team.

Research Question #5: What could be done to make everyone feel more accepted in Agricultural Education?

Finally the students were asked what could be done to make everyone feel more accepted in Agricultural Education. The responses to this question were the liveliest of all the responses. The students in all of the focus groups had ideas as to how to make people not only feel more accepted, but also how to make people more educated about agriculture. A good portion of the students who had not been overly active in their participation in the previous questions, played and built off what other students were saying. A student who had not participated in any activities shared this comment:
So, I’m not a competitive person at all. That’s why I don’t play sports or anything. I like sports, but I just like playing them for fun, I don’t care who wins. All the ag activities that I know of are competitions of some sort. That’s all we do, we compete in sports, we compete in this stuff, we compete about grades, clothes, cars, boyfriends; seriously, high school is like a huge competition. It would be nice if we could do something with kids from other schools that are in ag programs, like just hangout and eat pizza or something, not like an eating contest either, just being social.

This notion of participating in social activities was mentioned in every focus group. The students named numerous activities that they thought would be beneficial to the agricultural society as a whole. Suggestions for activities included socials, pizza parties, dances, camping trips, and multi-school community projects just to name a few.

Other suggestions from the students to increase the general knowledge about the Agricultural Education classes, programs, and activities included better use of the media sources available at Coronado High School such as the newspaper, TV station, and the school website. Other students suggested that their success in competitions needed to be publicized more. Many students reported that it was their responsibility as students and members of the Agricultural Education classes and program to promote the Agricultural Education program with pride and help attract more students and receive positive recognition.

It was suggested by several students that a short course in the Agricultural Education program be required for all students at the high school. Numerous students
indicted that if they had known about the agriculture program earlier in their high school career, that they would have enrolled in the classes earlier. The students believed that agriculture was too important for just a few number of students to gain valuable education about it in classes like the ones in which they were enrolled.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The overall purpose of this study was to identify what specific characteristics and environmental conditions were perceived to encourage or discourage Hispanic students from enrolling in the Agricultural Education program and participating in agricultural education activities. The objectives of the study were to gain a clearer understanding of the following questions: (a) what made you decide to enroll in agriculture classes; (b) what do your family and friends say about you taking agriculture classes; (c) what do you think other teachers are saying about the agriculture program; (d) when you participate in agricultural education activities, do you feel like you are accepted by the other people participating in the activity; and (e) what could be done to make everyone feel more accepted in agricultural education. This chapter discusses the summary of the study, conclusions, implications, and recommendations for the study as well as recommendations for future research.

Summary of Study

Students were asked to discuss what had led them to decide to enroll in Agriculture Education classes. Students stated numerous reasons for their enrollment in the Agriculture Education program. Throughout the various focus groups the majority of the responses fell into one of three general categories: (a) family involvement in
agriculture or an agriculture education program, (b) personal interest, and (c) suggested or placed by guidance counselors.

The students were next asked what they thought their family and friends said about them taking Agriculture Education classes. The responses to this focus group question in regard to the family were overwhelmingly positive. When indicating the perceptions of their friends, the responses became a little more mixed.

Students were then asked what they thought the other teachers said about the Agriculture Education program. Few of the students responded with a positive perception of the Agricultural Education classes. Those that did report positive perceptions did not elect to elaborate any further than simply stating that they thought some of the other teachers believed it was a good opportunity. The vast majority of the responses were that most of the other teachers and staff had no idea about the Agriculture Education classes. Several students reported that they were also active in sports, and that often times participating in Agricultural Education activities was not an acceptable excuse for missing practice, when other activities were excused.

The students were then asked that when they participated in Agricultural Education activities, did they perceive they were accepted by the other participants in the activities, and what made them feel this way. The responses were very limited in response to this question. Few of the students participated in activities outside of Coronado High School. Some reasons the students gave for not participating in Agricultural Education activities included sports, volunteering, work, no time, and many were just not interested.
Finally the students were asked what could be done to make everyone feel more accepted in Agricultural Education. The responses to this question were the liveliest of all the responses. The students in all of the focus groups had ideas as to how to make people not only feel more accepted, but also how to make people more educated about agriculture. A good portion of the students who had not been overly active in their participation in the previous questions, played and built off what other students were saying.

**Conclusions**

The conclusions will be written by research question rather than by priority. Event though some conclusions may be of greater essence, it is clearer to present the conclusions by research questions.

Research question number one inquired about what prompted the students to enroll in the Agricultural Education classes. Based on the findings of the study, a conclusion may be that regardless of ethnic background, all of the students have the same goals and big dreams that they wish to attain. In addition, based on the evidence provided by the students, it may be concluded that the agricultural education program is perceived to be a dumping ground for those students who appear to not be succeeding in the general education courses.

Research question number two asked what the students’ friends and family said about them being enrolled in the Agricultural Education classes. Based on the findings of the study, it may be concluded that students who had families that were involved in the agricultural industry, were more likely to enroll. Based on the evidence provided by the students, a conclusion may be that the students not enrolled in the Agricultural Education
classes had an inaccurate stereotypical view of the students who were enrolled in the Agricultural Education classes.

The third research question inquired about what the students thought the other teachers said about the Agricultural Education classes. Based on the responses, it may be concluded that the majority of the teachers and staff were not even aware that Agricultural Education classes existed at Coronado High School. From the finding, it could also be concluded that the negative view of those teachers and staff members who were aware of the Agricultural Education classes, negatively impacted the views of all students, both enrolled and not enrolled in the Agricultural Education classes.

The fourth research question asked if the students believed that they were accepted by other participants in Agricultural Education activities. Based on the evidence of the study, it could be concluded that the students believed that they were accepted by other individuals participating in the Agricultural Education activities, regardless of years of participation, age, knowledge, or ethnic background. A second conclusion from this research question is that there may be a communication issue preventing many students from participating in Agricultural Education activities. One student indicated that she was in the agriculture building every day, and she was never aware of what was going on or what was available for participation. Another student in that focus group informed her that there was a bulletin board in the hallway that listed the activities by both week and month.

The fifth research question asked what the students thought could be done to make everyone be more accepted in Agricultural Education classes and activities. Based on a majority perception, a conclusion may be that there needs to be non-competitive,
social activities, in which the students may participate. The students indicated that this would be not only beneficial at their school, but also if it was inclusive of other Agricultural Education programs in the area. A second conclusion from this research question may be that by making the participation and successes of the students known to a larger population, that it could encourage others to either enroll, or at a minimum, become more aware, if not more interested in, Agricultural Education.

**Implications**

Failure to provide an inclusive environment is detrimental and discouraging to students regardless of their ethnic background. By using the Agricultural Education program as a dumping ground, the guidance counselors are undermining the ability of the program to effectively reach the educational needs and requirements of those students who elect to enroll.

It is implied that students who come from an agricultural background are more likely to enroll, and re-enroll in the Agricultural Education classes. It is also implied that by the general student population not being educated or informed about the Agricultural Education program, that they perpetuate an inaccurate stereotypical perception of those students who do enroll in the Agricultural Education classes.

It was clear that other teachers at the same school did not know that the Agricultural Education classes existed. This implies that perhaps there is a major failure on behalf of the Agricultural Education program relative to public relations.

The evidence of the study implies that those students who are enrolled and participate in Agricultural Education classes and activities, in general, believe that they are accepted by the other individuals who are also participating. Another implication is
that it may be necessary to take extra steps to be inclusive of all Agricultural Education classes and activity participants.

Due to the non-participation in Agricultural Education activities by some students due to a disliking for competition, it is implied that there also need to be other activities provided that are non-competitive which would then allow more students to participate in Agricultural Education activities.

**Recommendations**

The recommendations will be written by research question rather than by priority. Even though some recommendations may be of greater essence, it is clearer to present the recommendations by research questions.

*For the Study*

Based on the evidence that the Agricultural Education program is used as a dumping ground, it is recommended that the teachers of the Agricultural Education program schedule informational meetings with the guidance counselors and other teachers to clearly identify what courses are taught, what skills could possibly be gained, and what are some of the benefits of a student being enrolled in the Agriculture Education classes.

Being that many of the students who are enrolled in the Agricultural Education program came from agricultural families, it is recommended that methods be found that would encourage other students from non-agricultural backgrounds to enroll in Agricultural Education classes and participate in Agricultural Education activities. Currently enrolled Agricultural Education program students could be utilized to spread
the word to the rest of the student population as to the benefits of enrolling in the Agricultural Education program.

Along with the previous recommendation to attract students with a non-agricultural background, it is recommended that steps be taken to attempt to change the inaccurate stereotypical perception that all the students who are enrolled in the Agricultural Education program are cowboys who wear big belt buckles, cowboy hats, and tight jeans. Clearly, perception of the Agricultural Education program and of the students enrolled in the program is a barrier for many potential new students.

Because currently enrolled students tend not to participation in Agricultural Education activities due to the competitive nature of the activities, it is recommended to incorporate other non-competitively based activities in an effort to allow the largest number of Agricultural Education students to participate on some level. Non-competitive type activities may draw a different type of clientele into the Agricultural Education program.

For Further Research

Recommendations for further research would include a need for more in-depth focus group interviews to gain a deeper and clearer picture of the perceptions held about Agricultural Education by Coronado High School students. In addition, it is recommended that selected students be invited to participate in the focus group interviews.

Throughout analyzing the transcripts of the focus groups, the underlying theme of environmental comfort arose. In future focus groups, it would be recommended to have the students attempt to identify factors or conditions about Agricultural Education classes
that provide an environment that is perceived to encourage camaraderie, acceptance, participation, and enrollment. Identifying these factors and conditions would allow for better preparation of future teachers of Agricultural Education programs to ensure that everyone who wants to participate believes they are able to and wanted to participate.

Additionally, if a similar study of focus groups were to be conducted utilizing the same research questions, it would be recommended to modify question numbers 4 and 5. The intent of the research question number 4 was to gauge the students’ perception of whether or not they believed that they were accepted by participants from other schools, not their own. This question is also where the majority of the students expressed a concern about the competitive level of the Agricultural Education activities, which would have been a more appropriate response for research number 5. Modifications to these questions would possibly allow for more robust responses and provide a greater understanding of the thoughts and perceptions of students.

The next recommendation would be for another in-depth focus group interview with two constituencies of faculty at Coronado High School. One faculty group should be the three current Agricultural Education teachers, and the second group should be a group of pre-selected general education teachers. It is further recommended that a focus group section be held of administrators to include, guidance counselors, assistant principals, and other administrators who make curricular decisions for students.

Researchers ought to explore the feasibility of conducting regional or national research using various university faculties for deeper learning and a more complete picture on a national scale.
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