

RESEARCH

**Student Perceptions of Agricultural Advocacy – A Mixed Methods Study**

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### **Introduction/Need for research**

Production agriculture is a controversial subject (Fraser, 2001). Fraser (2001) suggests that disagreements about the ethics involved with production agriculture often manifest in the form of emotionally charged claims that neither fully nor accurately represent the agriculture industry. Agriculturists must learn to recognize and use advocacy and persuasive techniques in response to inaccurate statements. Advocacy involves “pleading a cause, or encouraging someone to support, speak, or write in favor of a particular behavior or action” (Johnson & Mappin, 2005, p. 2). As new online social networking sites and technology intensive media emerge, opportunities to increase the possible audience for agricultural advocacy are expanded (Hon, 2006). While activists increase efforts to displace modern production agriculture, a sense of urgency is created for the future workforce of the agricultural industry to develop the skills needed for effective advocacy. However, opportunities to engage undergraduate students in learning advocacy skills are both limited and underdeveloped. The need for research concerning advocacy is broad. First, the 2011-2015 National Research Agenda identifies public and policy maker understanding of agriculture and natural resources as the top priority research area for those employed in food and agricultural systems (Doerfert, 2011). Second, as the industry and skills needed to work in the industry evolve, the agricultural workforce must develop advocacy skills to remain globally competitive (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry [DAFF], 2009). Third, agricultural educators should be familiar with student perceptions of advocacy in order to develop advocacy based curriculum. Finally, though the need for research is evident, a search for articles with advocacy as the primary subject in the *Journal of Agricultural Education* and other agricultural discipline journals yielded zero results. The purpose of this study was to explore student perceptions of agricultural advocacy. The researchers aimed to determine whether or not students pursuing a degree in agriculture held the same attitudes toward animal agriculture, and assess student definitions of advocacy, student perceptions of effective advocacy skills, and student opinions of the importance of advocacy in agricultural careers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was grounded in Festinger’s (1957) cognitive dissonance theory. According to Festinger (1957), people desire consistency among individual concepts including attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, values, and opinions. Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that dissonance occurs when information is presented that contradicts with one’s held concepts, thus motivating an individual to action. Action can take the form of additional inquiry, or can cause individuals to formulate an appropriate response to justify their existing worldview. Thus, bias, opposition, and analyses in cognitive dissonance presents an opportunity for learning (Gorski, 2009). In this study, cognitive dissonance was introduced to provoke student to reflection on advocacy.

### **Methodology**

Participants were undergraduate students ( $n = 15$ ) enrolled in an oral communications course for agriculture majors. The mixed methods approach was a sequential exploratory study with a quantitative→qualitative two-strand design of inquiry (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). First, the Animal Attitudes Scale (AAS) (Herzog, Betchart, & Pittman, 1991) was administered to determine attitudes toward animal rights and animal welfare. The AAS, assesses individual differences in attitudes toward the treatment of animals through a 20-item Likert-type instrument; Cronbach's alpha = 0.93. Student scores were assessed on the AAS to determine whether they held attitudes consistent with animal rights or animal welfare. Based on the results, students were then assigned to one of two groups - animal rights ( $n = 8$ ) or animal welfare ( $n = 7$ ) for the purpose of viewing a short video that advocated for issues opposite the viewpoint of the student. For example, students whose scores on the AAS indicated attitudes in line with animal rights watched a video advocating for animal welfare through persuasive methods. Students in the animal welfare group watched a video advocating for animal rights in the same manner. After watching the video, students provided written responses to 11 open ended questions regarding agricultural advocacy. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003), participants may express opinions more freely with open-ended questions than interviews, deeming this method of data collection fitting. Qualitative data were analyzed using constant comparative analysis, while inter-rater reliability was established because the researchers coded responses separately, thus increasing confidence in the emergent themes (Bernard & Ryan, 2010).

### **Results/Findings**

Using the results from the AAS, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare attitudes toward the treatment of animals in those who support animal rights and those who support animal welfare. There was a significant difference in the scores for the animal rights group ( $M = 50.38$ ,  $SD = 8.62$ ) and the animal welfare group ( $M = 73.43$ ,  $SD = 8.30$ );  $t(13) = 5.26$ ,  $p = 0.0002$ . Based on the qualitative data analysis regarding student perceptions of agricultural advocacy, two primary themes emerged: (1) Awareness of advocacy - (a) definitions of advocacy, (b) limited knowledge/preparation in coursework, (c) need for combining persuasive techniques; and (2) Value of advocacy - (a) strengthened argument, critical thinking and literacy skills and (b) importance of advocacy skills in professional futures.

### **Conclusions**

By introducing cognitive dissonance through advocacy materials from differing viewpoints, students were empowered to experience advocacy in action and reflect on effective advocacy skills. Results indicated differences regarding student attitudes towards animal practices; not all undergraduate agriculture students have similar attitudes about animal agriculture. Variance regarding student definitions of advocacy suggests that instruction of advocacy at the undergraduate level is limited and underlines misunderstandings about proper components, influence, and use of advocacy in agriculture. Participants suggest the need to combine emotion, personal stories, as well as images as effective advocacy techniques for this age group. Finally, students agree that advocacy skills in the agriculture industry will be necessary as a future agricultural professional; however, students do not feel prepared to advocate effectively.

### **Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession**

Implications of this study are important to agricultural education. Enhanced curriculum development is necessary to engage students in critical thinking, literacy, and advocacy skill development; emphasis should be placed on both traditional and modern technological models of advocacy. Further investigation with a larger audience is recommended to expand the findings of the current study. As agricultural educators aim to equip students with advocacy skills, care should be taken to not impose certain views, but to enhance individual perspectives. With increased focus on teaching advocacy, agricultural educators must become more engaged in issues and help the public and policy makers understand the full gamut of agriculture.

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