

A COMPARISON OF NATIONAL LEADERS' STRATEGIC THINKING TO THE STRATEGIC INTENTIONS OF THE AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION PROFESSION

Tim J. McDermott, Teacher
Waterloo High School, Waterloo IL
Neil A. Knobloch, Assistant Professor
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Abstract

This instrumental case study compared the common themes of strategic intent from three strategic plans in agricultural education to current strategic thinking and beliefs of national leaders and policy makers. Eleven strategic intentions emerged from the strategic plans. Program and curriculum reform, as well as leadership and partnerships were mentioned the most in the strategic plans. There was a difference between the strategic plans and the national leaders regarding the need for programmatic, policy, and budgetary changes at the state and federal levels. The national leaders in agricultural education realized the importance of congressional visits, but questioned if their strategies were working. National leaders in education and agriculture stressed the need of agricultural literacy and awareness and funding opportunities within existing legislation. National policy makers stressed the need for more communications about agricultural education so that they are prepared when funding opportunities arise. The agricultural education profession should focus on policy changes and assess the effectiveness of implementing its strategic initiatives.

Introduction

The agricultural education profession has struggled to implement its strategic plans on a national level for many years (Vaughn, 2000). A few years after the National Research Council's (NRC) (1988) study, Shinn (1994) recommended that the agricultural education profession engage in redefining a strategic plan that collectively communicates a vision, beliefs, values, and focal-point issues. A decade after the NRC's recommendations, Conroy (1997) concluded that agricultural teacher education programs did not change their content.

Environmental scans, needs assessments, and strategic action plans engage stakeholders to help identify critical issues, needs, and priorities (Bryson, 1995). There have been three strategic plans in agricultural education since the NRC's (1988) study. Most recently, a strategic plan was created based on a national visioning initiative of local, state, and national input. There should be no need to question the

validity of a strategic plan if it was developed based on consensus of a representative body of stakeholders. However, two issues make stakeholder input difficult to accomplish: (a) stakeholder identification and representation (Kelsey & Pense, 2001); and, (b) meaningful participation (Grudens-Schuck, 2001). A profession or organization should check the validity and relevancy of its strategic intentions and initiatives as perceived by national leaders in agricultural education, education and agriculture, and legislative policy who help shape public policy that can influence the profession.

Policy makers and stakeholders are demanding that educators respond to changing and increasing needs of students in public education (Cibulka, 2001). Policy makers engage in discourse and reallocate limited resources to fund initiatives (Association of Career and Technical Education, 2003) that they believe will help solve problems in the nation's best interest. Career and technical education and

agricultural education have received state and federal funds for many years and have not been exempt from the scrutiny of legislators (Applegate, 2003; NRC, 1988). Policy makers and educational administrators question the value of agricultural education when there is a shortfall of resources, the reallocation of resources is called into question, relevant community and societal needs are not met, or the educational programming is not perceived as effective or worthwhile.

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education's report, *A Nation at Risk*, served as a wake-up call for educators across the nation (NRC, 1988). In response to the increasing scrutiny, the agricultural education profession conducted four strategic planning initiatives to respond to stakeholders' needs, address the issues in education and society, and influence public policy. The National Council for Vocational and Technical Education in Agriculture was formed in 1983 in response to the uncertainty regarding the future of the United States Department of Education. The organization was formed to help develop a uniform national presence for vocational education. In 1990, the name of the organization changed to the National Council for Agricultural Education (NCAE) in response to the changing demographics of the members.

In 1988, the NRC presented a call for reform in agricultural education based on innovative programmatic leadership at the state and national levels to address the concerns about the declining profitability and international competitiveness of American agriculture, as well as concerns about declining enrollments, instructional content, and quality in agricultural education programs. The agricultural education profession has been positioning for systematic reform and change for more than a decade. Although the NRC's findings received a great deal of attention within the agricultural education community, little action has been taken to address this seminal study (Conroy, 1997).

In 1989, the *Strategic Plan for Agricultural Education* affirmed to "...provide the central focus for the vital interaction that will build and expand the

national presence through concerted action for excellence" (p. 6). Optimistically, this plan was "to provide a total dynamic educational system" (p. 2). This plan expanded on the findings and themes from the NRC's study. About five years later, *Building the Future and Serving Today* was second in the series of agricultural education strategic plans following the NRC's (1988) report. During 1994-1995, the Vision 2000 Task Force of leaders in agricultural education revised the 1989 National Strategic Plan for Agricultural Education with two noticeable changes. First, the task force reorganized and reworded the mission statement, values, resolutions, and call to action. Second, the task force revised implementation strategies for the same seven goals from the 1989 strategic plan by emphasizing that "educational professionals must learn how to function in and be a part of new school environments of integrated instruction, Tech-Prep and School-to-Work transitional systems" (n.p.) The first two strategic plans were developed based on input from the agricultural education leadership and little effort was done to get input beyond the leadership circle (Vaughn, 2000).

In 2000, the National Council for Agricultural Education reiterated the call for action of the 1989 plan with targeted efforts to get a wider range of stakeholder input (Vaughn, 2000). *The National Strategic Plan and Action Agenda for Agricultural Education* called for a two-fold mission: (a) prepare students for career success; and, (b) create lifetime awareness of the global agriculture, food, fiber, and natural resources systems. Four goals articulated the need for highly motivated, well-educated teachers; a seamless, lifelong instructional system; conversational literacy of all students; and, partnerships and strategic alliances that would ensure agricultural education's continuing presence in K-12 education.

Although agricultural educators have been active creating strategic plans that would provide focal points to help mobilize the resources toward collective action and address the issues of local communities, few studies have been conducted to determine the validity and relevancy of these strategic

plans in agricultural education. Specifically, two research teams have studied strategic plans and public policy impacts. First, Eaton and Bruening (1996) found that agricultural teachers in Pennsylvania agreed with the NRC (1988) recommendations and the need to change their programs, create partnerships, and collaborate with other departments in the school to close the gap between agricultural education and academics.

Second, Conroy and her colleagues conducted several studies related to the NRC's (1988) recommendations—a career study; teacher preparation study; and, agriscience study. Conroy (2000b) conceptualized agricultural careers into six broad clusters, found eight conceptual clusters to improve the preparation of teachers (Conroy, 2000a), and found that stakeholders agreed that a science-based agricultural education program would improve the image of agricultural education if it remained community-based, invoked experiential learning, and stimulated leadership development (Dailey, Conroy, & Shelley-Tolbert, 2001). Further, Dailey et al. found that the greatest challenges facing agricultural education today that were also identified by the NRC were: (a) making people aware of the importance of and new changes in agriculture; (b) recruiting and keeping students interested and involved in agriculture; and, (c) promoting agriculture and dispelling common misconceptions about agriculture. Agriculture teachers were keenly aware of emphasizing agriscience and agricultural literacy to overcome the vocational stereotypes people have of agricultural education (Shelley-Tolbert, Conroy, & Dailey, 2000). Agriculture teachers believed that making their curricula more science-based would make agricultural education appear more academic and rigorous and attract more students from diverse audiences (Shelley-Tolbert et al.). The need for more students was not the only concern. Dailey et al. (2001) found a new challenge that was not identified in 1988—a shortage of qualified teachers in agricultural education. If the challenges in agricultural education have not changed in the last 15 years, do national leaders in agricultural

education, education, agriculture, and legislative policy see the same challenges facing agricultural education?

Purposes and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to examine the strategic intentions of agricultural education over the past 15 years and determine if there are discrepancies with the current strategic thinking and beliefs of national leaders in the policy arena related to agricultural education. The objectives of this study were to: (1) identify themes of strategic intentions and initiatives from *Understanding Agriculture: New Directions for Education*, *The Strategic Plan for Agricultural Education*, *Building the Future and Serving Today*, and, *The National Strategic Plan and Action Agenda for Agricultural Education*; (2) identify the emerging interests and initiatives selected national leaders and policy makers saw as key opportunities for agricultural education; and, (3) determine if there were similarities and differences between the strategic intentions from agricultural education's strategic plans and the strategic thinking and beliefs of national leaders and policy makers in Washington, D.C.

Method and Procedures

This instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) used ethnographic methods to address the objectives because of the need to understand the strategic intentions and initiatives in a fuller, more meaningful context of the activities, understandings, and opinions of national leaders. Ethnography is both a process and a product that is generated from and informed by the meaningful experiences of the ethnographer interacting with lives in the field (Tedlock, 2000). A 15-week congressional internship in Washington, D.C., which focused on analyzing agricultural and educational issues during the Fall, 2002 semester, served as the setting of interest for the study. Although the setting was ideal to interact with leaders working for the promotion of agricultural education and agriculture at the national level, the researcher was limited in the

number of interviews and engagement with participants due to the brief time frame of the internship.

The researcher's interpretivist role was to determine the relative effectiveness and importance of the national strategic initiatives by letting the participants decide the relevance and opportunities to their particular situations and viewpoints (Donmoyer, 2001) from a transactional stance (Schwandt, 2000). The researcher gathered the data through three methods: (a) document analysis of four pertinent documents' goals related to national strategic intentions in agricultural education; (b) observations of a two-day board meeting of the National Council for Agricultural Education; and, (c) 12 hours of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with four national leaders representing the United States Department of Education (USDE), National FFA Organization, and National Council for Agricultural Education; five leaders representing the Association of Career and Technical Education, an agricultural-based lobbying firm, American Farm Bureau Association, and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA); and, five leaders from the U.S. Senate, U.S. House of Representatives, and the House Agriculture Committee. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and the semi-structured interviews were guided by five open-ended questions: How do you define agricultural education? What work have you done with agricultural education? What are the funding options for agricultural education on a national level? What is the future of agricultural education? How can agricultural education meet the needs of its stakeholders? Probing questions were used in the interviews to determine if the initiatives at the national level were aligned with the themes identified in the strategic plans.

Trustworthiness and believability of the study were established through the use of various methods to ensure credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Donmoyer, 2001). Credibility was developed by establishing rapport with the participants and understanding the context of the field during the four months of data collection. The

researcher developed an emic view by being an active participant of a U.S. senator's legislative activities regarding agriculture and education. To increase credibility, the researcher reflexively situated himself in the study regarding how his background could have influenced data collection and analysis (Denzin, 2000): He was a (a) preservice agriculture teacher; (b) former student and FFA member in agricultural education; and, (c) concerned stakeholder of the agricultural education community regarding the limited impact of the strategic plans. By exposing his three roles, the researcher was more accountable to minimize any misinterpretations due to subjectivity of the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

The researcher was accountable to his subjectivity through peer debriefing with a faculty advisor and experts in the field of agricultural education. Reflexive journaling, direct quotes, and member checks were also utilized to establish dependability and to ensure accuracy of the evidence. The researcher created an audit trail to establish confirmability by compiling and referencing all information and materials used in the study. Paper, pencils, and highlighter markers were used to help create organizers to code and summarize the qualitative data. The researcher created a coding scheme of the major concepts, central ideas, or related responses (Glesne, 1999). The researcher described the participants and methods so that readers can determine if the study can be transferred to other contexts or situations. The participants' responses were compared to strategic planning documents to enhance transferability.

Results

For the first objective, 11 key intentions were identified in strategic plans of 1989, 1994, and 2000 related to those in the benchmark study of 1988 (Table 1): (a) program and curriculum reform; (b) agricultural literacy; (c) diversity; (d) new educational technology, media, and strategies; (e) supervised experiences; (f) FFA leadership development; (g) policy changes; (h) leadership and partnerships; (i) exemplary programs; (j) teacher development and quality; and, (k)

entrepreneurship and innovation. The 1989 and 1994 strategic plans were combined because they contained essentially the same content; one difference was the 1994 plan emphasized that agricultural educators needed to work with new school environments that focused on integrated transitional systems of Tech-Prep and School-to-Work. The two themes that were discussed the most in the three documents

were: (a) program and curriculum reform; and, (b) leadership and partnerships. Two themes mentioned in the earlier documents, but not mentioned in the goals of the most recent 2000 strategic plan were: (a) exemplary programs; and, (b) entrepreneurship and innovation. The theme, policy changes, was a recommendation from the NRC that was not addressed in any of the following strategic plans.

Table 1
Summary of Key Intentions in Agricultural Education

Themes	Understanding Agriculture (1988)	The Strategic Plan for Agricultural Education (1989) & Building the Future and Serving Today (1994)	The National Strategic Plan and Action Agenda for Agricultural Education (2000)
Program and Curriculum Reform	Focus of agricultural education must change and subject matter must be broadened; major revisions needed within vocational agriculture and quality of programs must be enhanced	Review, update, and broaden a production agriculture based curricula to agriscience, agribusiness, and natural resources; a competency-based and articulated curriculum; adjust curricula to changing school environments; comprehensive contemporary programs for career-bound students; programs need to continually and systematically respond to trends and demands of the marketplace; agricultural education programs will impact the marketplace and educational systems; develop creative ways to continually monitor the pulse of the marketplace and educational environment; elevate and extend standards of excellence in classroom and laboratory instruction, supervised experience, and student organizations; educational professionals must learn how to function in and be a part of new school environments of integrated instruction, Tech-Prep and School-to-Work transitional systems	All teachers include agriculture in a relevant, integrated instructional approach; cross-curricular course development; students are prepared for successful careers in global agriculture, food, fiber, and natural resources systems; collaboration among educators and educational entities ensures students benefit from effectiveness and efficiency; agriculture teacher collaborate with other groups to bring factual information about agriculture to all students
Agricultural Literacy	K-12 systematic instruction about agriculture	Strive to educate all people in the nation about the total agricultural image and literacy; make a concerted effort to bring meaningful programs to all people in the nation	All students have access to seamless, lifelong instruction; all students are conversationally literate in agriculture, food, fiber, and natural resources

Themes	Understanding Agriculture (1988)	The Strategic Plan for Agricultural Education (1989) & Building the Future and Serving Today (1994)	The National Strategic Plan and Action Agenda for Agricultural Education (2000)
Diversity	Establish specialized magnet schools for the agricultural sciences in urban/ suburban areas	To serve all people and groups equally and without discrimination; redesign programs and activities to achieve an enrollment that reflects a diverse society	Student enrollments represent the diversity of the school population; all students in urban, suburban, and rural schools, have access to high-quality agricultural education programs
New Educational Technology, Media, and Strategies	Enhance instruction with high quality computer technology and instructional media	Modern equipment and facilities	Agricultural education leaders provide instruction of educational technologies and teaching strategies; instructional systems and materials provide for diverse learning styles
Supervised Experiences	All students in vocational agriculture programs should participate in SOE's	Work-based learning through supervised experiences should provide real-world experiences, develop a positive work ethic and realistic occupation experiences	Every agriculture student has opportunities for experiential learning
FFA Leadership Development	FFA should change to reflect a contemporary image, and a broadened and improved program	Amplify and expand the "whole person" concept to include all students, not just those in FFA; promote and enable meaningful participation of all students to develop leadership, personal, and interpersonal skills in student organizations	Every agriculture student has opportunities for leadership development
Policy Changes	Programmatic and budgetary policy changes at the state and federal levels		

Themes	Understanding Agriculture (1988)	The Strategic Plan for Agricultural Education (1989) & Building the Future and Serving Today (1994)	The National Strategic Plan and Action Agenda for Agricultural Education (2000)
Leadership and Partnerships	Build coalitions to provide leadership in the initiation of agricultural literacy and agricultural education reform efforts; innovative programmatic leadership needed at state and national levels; states should establish commissions to identify needs and strategies for implementation of agricultural literacy and program reform	Provide leadership and cultivate strong partnerships in the total educational system; find ways to be “a part of – not apart from” colleagues throughout the educational system; develop a united national presence through networking, communication, cooperation, and coordination; strive to expand the quantity and quality of relationships with colleagues throughout all of education; enter the mainstream of education to contribute and receive ideas and leadership; mobilize media, government, industry, education and community support groups to help achieve an enrollment that reflects diverse society	Provide learning experiences for school administrators and counselors on career opportunities in agriculture; broad-based coalitions of groups and organizations collaborate to develop and disseminate contemporary agricultural curricula for all students; partnerships and strategic alliances provide strong support for agricultural education; numerous and varied stakeholders, inside and outside the school system, engage in a continuing effort to strengthen and refine the shared vision, mission, and goals; positive working relationships with multiple stakeholders to build lines of communication and provide a diverse work force for the agricultural, food, fiber, and natural resources industries; partnerships and strategic alliances to ensure a continuous presence of education in and about agriculture
Exemplary Programs	Exemplary programs should be identified, studied, and emulated	Student organizations should be emulated by all branches of education; concerted effort to extend our standard of excellence	
Teacher Development and Quality	Teacher preparation and in-service education programs must be revised and expanded to develop more competent teachers and professionals	All students are taught by a qualified teacher; shortage of teachers hamper the development of quality programs	An abundance of highly motivated, well-educated teachers; sufficient quantity of qualified teachers; prepare all K-adult teachers to integrate agriculture; provide relevant instructional leadership and professional development; research-based teacher preparation; agricultural awareness for school administrators and counselors
Entrepreneurship and Innovation		Foster the spirit of free enterprise and develop creative entrepreneurship and innovation; must never be satisfied with status quo	

For the second objective, the common themes with supporting evidence from the interviews were presented in three groups: (a) national leaders in agricultural education, (b) national leaders in education and agriculture, and (c) national policy makers. Three themes emerged from the interviews and observations of the **national leaders in agricultural education**. First, during the October, 2002 National Council for Agricultural Education (The Council) meeting, the board spent one hour refocusing on the purpose of the Council. The Council re-established its purpose to provide a unified voice for the agricultural education profession, which clarified the reason why this ideational group organized in the national policy arena (Cibulka, 2001). Then, the Council developed an action agenda of five priorities that the profession should focus on collectively to implement its new purpose: (a) develop a constituent feedback process and simultaneously communicate the leadership role of the Council; (b) report the status and plans of agricultural education through annual reports; (c) realign, revise, and activate the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the USDA; (d) solidify relations with the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) research committee; and, (e) establish a highly focused, continuous strategy to partner with Congress through grassroots engagement to best serve the needs of students.

Second, the national leaders in agricultural education stressed the importance of congressional visits. The national leaders examined the impact of the current strategies used to visit with national policy makers. Although the leaders felt that the congressional visits were very important, they questioned their impact on influencing policy development. The leaders expressed a desire to change the strategies used in the congressional relations process. One leader stated, "The Council may want to rethink how they approach D.C. visits to critical congressional committee members or sub-committees." It appeared that the national leadership understood the importance of building good congressional relationships to aid in the

development of national initiatives and to provide continued funding for agricultural education. During the Council's board meeting, three key messages were discussed and outlined as talking points to be delivered on the Congressional visits: (a) the need to build and maintain support for current and future funding; (b) the impact of policy decisions on the profession; and, (c) building knowledge of the purpose of the Council and the career opportunities that agricultural education creates.

Third, the national leadership in agricultural education emphasized that the profession should focus on the strategic goals that were outlined in *The National Strategic Plan and Action Agenda for Agricultural Education*. One leader believed that the agricultural education profession needs to focus more energy on re-evaluating the goals set forth in the national plans. The leader also highlighted national efforts that were taken to achieve the strategic goals in the current strategic plan. It appeared that some of the goals had received more attention than others, and that there was more work to be done on all four goals.

Three themes emerged from the interviews of the **national leaders in education and agriculture**. First, the leaders did not have clearly defined concepts of agricultural education. Their definitions were inferred from their understandings of agriculture and were not as broadly defined as agricultural education is today. Further, there were also concerns expressed about the lack of knowledge and understanding of agricultural education among the stakeholders' constituents. A congressional relations staff member with the American Farm Bureau Federation stated, "In general, the public's base knowledge on agriculturally related issues is not good." Although the leaders indicated that progress has been made in raising the awareness of agriculture and agricultural education, there is still much work to do in making the constituents of these national leaders more knowledgeable about informational resources of agriculture. The second theme that emerged from the national leaders focused on funding. When asked about the future of agricultural education funding at

the national level, the stakeholders responded with cautious optimism. The leaders agreed that there are limited federal funds for agricultural education. The two primary sources of funding for agricultural education mentioned by the leaders were the Carl Perkins funds for career and technical education and Farm Bill funds for specific educational programs in agriculture. A leader in education mentioned that Perkins funds are likely to see continued challenges with each reauthorization. Funding via the Farm Bill (USDA, 2004; Secondary and Two-Year Postsecondary Agriculture Education Challenge Grants Program) has been maintained at relatively constant levels with small increases occasionally occurring and will likely remain in this trend in the future. Although funding sources are limited, the participants agreed that agricultural education should continually attempt to find new avenues of funding at the national level. Third, the leaders stressed the importance of forming strategic alliances to assist with the efforts of agricultural education at the national level. They agreed that targeting key groups of leaders, stakeholders, and policy makers would help accomplish the national goals of agricultural education. An agricultural lobbyist stressed the importance of building on the existing connections that agricultural education has with policy makers from states with strong agricultural backgrounds. This was also supported by another participant who emphasized the concept of building on the connections that are already in place to expand the knowledge and contacts into other important groups of decision makers. It appears that agricultural education could expand its programming and support base in urban settings, but this was not mentioned by the leaders in education and agriculture.

Three themes emerged from the interviews with the **national leaders in legislature** (policy makers). First, the five policy makers were knowledgeable about agricultural education. Each of the policy makers had a sound understanding of the concepts of agricultural education and the efforts in their congressional districts and at the national levels. The policy makers estimated that their colleagues' level of

knowledge about agricultural education tended to fall into three categories as stated by one of the policy makers, "The knowledge of the [agriculture] committee staff is great, the staff of the agricultural committee members is pretty good, however the general members tend to be less informed of agricultural and agricultural education related issues." Second, the policy makers agreed that agricultural education has a smaller role at the federal level than at the state level. The policy makers agreed that the majority of the regulations and operations of agricultural education is done at the state government level. However, each of the policy makers also indicated that it is appropriate to have a focus at the national scene as well. One policy maker summarized, "The state sets the priorities of what they need or envision for agricultural education and the federal government can serve as a partner. It is a 50-50 deal to meet the needs." Similar to the state and federal partnership, the policy makers stressed the importance of building partnerships between the agriculture, education, and appropriations staff members, as all are equally important in securing additional funding and support from the federal government. Third, the policy makers emphasized the importance of continued communication with the contacts that agricultural education has made. However, when asked if their office receives updates from agricultural education related organizations, the majority of the policy makers stated that they did not receive regular contact or updates. A policy maker suggested, "Agricultural education must build awareness and promote itself better than is currently being done." The policy makers felt that there may be opportunities for additional funding if they have all the needed information available when new funding opportunities arise. The policy makers agreed that anything is possible if they are aware of the benefits, impacts, and details of the funding proposals. Further, they indicated that their offices are willing to listen to proposals and would be willing to try to help agricultural education leaders if the right funding vehicles are present.

For the third objective, the similarities and differences between the strategic plans

and the themes from national leaders were identified. First, the leaders in agricultural education, leaders in education and agriculture, and policy makers mentioned three themes that were in agreement with the strategic plans: (a) the need for agricultural awareness and literacy; (b) the need for policy changes, which aligned with current federal funding sources; and, (c) the need for state-national partnerships to accomplish the strategic goals of agricultural education. Second, six themes emerged from the national leaders and policy makers that were not mentioned in the national strategic plans: (a) the need to work closely with policy makers regarding funding possibilities and opportunities; (b) the need to redefine the purpose of the Council; (c) the need to develop different strategies for the congressional visit process; (d) the need to re-evaluate progress and efforts of the national strategic goals; (e) the need to develop the knowledge base of policy makers about agricultural education; and, (f) the need for on-going communication with policy makers.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Consistent themes emerged from the NRC's (1988) study and the national strategic plans (1989, 1994, 2000) in agricultural education. Strategic intentions in agricultural education call for *programmatic changes* at the state and local levels, with very little focus on policy changes at the state and national levels. A noticeable difference between the strategic plans and the national leaders and policy makers was regarding the need for programmatic, policy, and budgetary changes at the state and federal levels. Perhaps the greatest implication of this study is that national and state leaders should focus on changing policies that would influence the programmatic reforms that are aligned with the local, state, and national needs in education. Further studies should investigate the barriers and opportunities that would help national leaders and policy makers make policy changes that could influence reform in agricultural education.

Themes of *communication and funding* appeared to be occurring in parallel between the leaders and policy makers, yet clear channels of communication were not making connections between the two groups. The Council strategized how to conduct congressional visits, while the policy makers expressed a need to know more about agricultural education activities and proposals. Further, the policy makers discussed that they would be willing to assist with funding opportunities if they worked more closely with leaders in agricultural education. However, little was mentioned in the national strategic plans regarding communication and funding goals.

Perhaps, one of the greatest needs is to communicate with policy makers and leaders in education and agriculture on an on-going basis about the impact of agricultural education programs. National policy makers depend on the information that they are given to make decisions on supporting agricultural education.

Communication is vital in the process to ensure that the proper information is reaching the policy makers (ACTE, 2003). The national policy makers were willing to listen to ideas regarding agricultural education. In some cases, educating the policy makers about agricultural education may be the first step in the communication process. Providing the national policy makers with regular updates of the efforts, trends, and accomplishments of agricultural education will better position the profession when a time of need arrives. Agricultural educators should cultivate relationships with stakeholders and policy makers at local, state, and national levels so that there can be pro-active efforts in capitalizing on opportunities as funding opportunities and policy changes match needs that can be met by agricultural education initiatives. Further, on-going communications with the policy makers and leaders in education and agriculture may increase their knowledge base of agricultural education. A need for a comprehensible definition of agricultural education is necessary for the national leaders in education and agriculture to clearly inform their constituents about agricultural education. The selected stakeholders felt that they can influence and

inform the people (Grudens-Schuck, 2001) they are representing about agricultural education if they had a better way to explain what exactly the profession entails. Further studies should be conducted to explore effective strategies of establishing and maintaining channels of communication between agricultural educators and national leaders and policy makers.

Literacy and awareness of agricultural education are the main issues that the national leaders in education and agriculture view as important for the future of agricultural education (Dailey et al., 2001; NRC, 1988; Shelley-Tolbert et al., 2000). Stakeholders can influence agricultural education to a large extent. The presence of the stakeholders can help in the relationship with national policymakers; however, if agricultural education does not continue to build the knowledge base and relations with the leaders in education and agriculture, the support of these stakeholders could be in danger. Agricultural educators should collaborate with and communicate their strategic intentions to many different groups of stakeholders. Further studies should be conducted to identify and determine the representation of the stakeholders of agricultural education (Kelsey & Pense, 2001), especially those who have not been traditionally represented.

The needs of the profession have been fairly consistent over the last 15 years. However, national leaders in agricultural education should re-evaluate the status and progress of the *national strategic plans and initiatives*. A leader in agricultural education recognized the need to evaluate the intentions in the strategic plans as well as the rate of accomplishment and indicated that the National Council for Agricultural Education is working on plans to meet the needs of agricultural education. National and state leaders need to evaluate their efforts and focus on how they can influence change to address these needs that continue to persist. Perhaps policy development intentions and strategies need to be developed to enact strategic initiatives and influence public policy that could help

agricultural education accomplish its strategic goals. Continual assessment and communication analyses (Cibulka, 2001) should be conducted to determine the effectiveness and marketing opportunities of the strategic initiatives.

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TIM J. MCDERMOTT is a teacher at Waterloo High School, 200 Bellefontaine Drive, Waterloo, IL 62298. Phone: (618) 939-3455 E-mail: mcdertim@wcusd5.net

NEIL A. KNOBLOCH is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Human and Community Development at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 139 Bevier, 905 S. Goodwin, Urbana, IL 61801. Phone: (217) 244-8093 E-mail: nknobloc@uiuc.edu.

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