

Florida State Fair Youth Livestock Achievement Program: An Educational Alternative for Youth

Tracy S. Hoover
Saundra H. TenBroeck
University of Florida

Abstract

This study was conducted to gather perceptions of youth livestock exhibitors toward an achievement program conducted by the Florida State Fair (FSF) during the first two years after initiation. The Achievement Program was applied to all eight youth livestock shows including: Beef Cattle, Dairy Cattle, Dairy Goats, Market Hogs, Market Steers, Poultry, Rabbits and Sheep. Youth have the opportunity to earn achievement points based on their individual efforts, which are translated into monies proportional to their involvement. Youth earn points by attending and participating in various educational events. The top four participants in each show have the opportunity to compete in a Champion event. In 1998, 572 and in 1999, 591 youth participated in the FSF Achievement Program.

Youth participation by age level was similar in 1998 and in 1999 with seniors making up the largest number of entries (54% and 56% respectively). Participants were asked to list the three things they liked the best about the program. For both years, youth liked the chance to earn money and achievement points, the educational aspect/chance to learn and the skill-a-thon as the top three aspects of the program. There was a difference in rankings of items liked best when participants were sorted based on previous state fair participation. Youth who did not participate in the FSF the previous year ranked the educational/opportunity to learn most frequently. Youth who did participate in the state fair the previous year ranked the opportunity to earn money/points most frequently. However, they did indicate that an advantage of showing a market animal in the Achievement Program was the opportunity to earn money based on their knowledge/preparation and that the opportunity to earn money was more evenly (fairly) distributed across all exhibitors.

Introduction/Theoretical Framework

Historically, youth livestock shows have been considered valuable for several reasons. From an animal agriculture perspective, youth livestock shows allow for recognition of superior animals and breeding/production efforts. Through the raising and exhibition of livestock, youth are exposed to the animal agriculture industry and many are motivated to pursue further education and related careers. Competition can be a great motivator and livestock projects afford youth opportunities to develop important life skills. Billings (1980) noted that there is a tremendous advantage associated with competition when it results in the acquisition of knowledge and negative when it detracts from learning.

There is a rich history in youth livestock programming that includes both competitive and non-competitive educational events. Livestock expos, quiz bowls, skill-a-thons, demonstrations, herdsman contests and tours have been used by county faculty, 4-H leaders, agricultural education instructors, and state specialists to teach youth animal agriculture techniques and enhance life skill development (Drew, 1963; Marsh, 1980; Sawyer, 1987 & Spike, 1997). The educational events and activities listed above help round out the experience of participation in a youth livestock project. Smith & Collins (1988) echo that one of the most important goals of 4-H and FFA is to provide educational opportunities for youth and note that consideration should be given to competition and its impact on the educational process. Many awards and recognition programs in the 4-H and FFA are closely linked to competition and the various leadership opportunities associated with youth livestock programs. Each year there are several prominent and highly publicized cases of unethical and illegal practices in youth livestock shows. Billings (1980) noted that historically, competition in youth livestock shows results in a few "winners" and many "losers." Over the past several decades the exhibition of market animals in youth livestock shows has become increasingly competitive. Murphy, Norwood & Dubes (1992) cite the correlation between the intensity of competition and the sale price of the top market animals. This phenomenon has tipped the balance at many shows from an educational experience to a profit-making venture, which in turn has led to occasional incidents of unethical/illegal practices. In 1992, Murphy et al. found evidence of unethical fitting and showing practices in youth/junior livestock shows in Texas. Some examples cited are, use of illegal drugs or chemicals, "altering" genetics, falsifying birth dates, use of custom fitters and physical alterations and abuse. Murphy et al., 1992 attribute these phenomena to the high dollar premiums gained for champion market animals in youth livestock shows. The competition for premiums has tended to shift the objectives for participation in livestock project to a profit-making venture and away from core values and principles that are central to the 4-H and FFA. The media exposure and public perceptions of these events are detrimental to all programs that involve youth.

Another long time concern associated with the 'show ring' is the lack of correlation to the 'real' livestock industry. This lack of correlation is most evident in market animal shows. The purchase of 'club' animals at inflated prices in an attempt to

buy the champion coupled with inflated auction prices for a select few leave many with a distorted view of the economics of raising livestock. Many of the practices used to prepare a market animal for show have little to do with standard industry practices for raising an animal for market. From an educational perspective, agents and teachers are placed in a conflict situation when teaching students about industry standards while coaching them on raising show animals.

The Florida State Fair Achievement Program began in 1998 to reward youth for the production, maintenance and showing of quality animals as well as participation in numerous educational events (Florida State Fair, 1999).

Objectives

Specific objectives of the study were to describe the profile and perceptions of youth participating in the 1998 and 1999 FSF Livestock Show and Achievement Program. Research questions compared the differences between perceptions of youth livestock exhibitors based upon previous state fair participation and identified perceptions of youth who previously participated in an auction component of the state fair or a county/state livestock sale toward the Achievement Program.

Materials and Methods

The population for the study was all youth livestock exhibitors that chose to participate in the Achievement Program during the 1998 (N=572) and the 1999 (N= 591) FSF. The researchers developed a one-page survey, which was reviewed for content validity by faculty in the departments of Animal Science and Agricultural Education and Communication. The State Fair Livestock Office mailed the survey to all exhibitors who participated in the market steer, market hog, dairy, breeding beef, sheep, rabbits, poultry and dairy goats divisions after the fair. The survey gathered data on youth participation by division, their level of participation; junior (8-11 years), intermediate (12 -14 years) or senior (15+ years), the three things they liked best about the program and the three things they would like to see changed in future achievement programs. Perceptions of youth who participated in the market hog and steer auction component of the 1998 state fair and in county/ state fairs were also assessed.

Three hundred thirty seven surveys (58.9%) were returned from the 1998 mailing and 351 surveys (59.4%) were returned in 1999. Descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis were used to analyze the data. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, 1999).

Results

Participation by enrollment in specie divisions was similar for both years (Table 1). Youth participated most frequently in breeding beef division (94 in 1998 and 95 in 1999) and least in the dairy goat division (17 and 21), respectively. Rules allow youth enter two specie divisions. Approximately, 47 (14%) in 1998 and 53 (15.1%) in 1999 of the respondents participated in two specie divisions.

Of the youth responding, the majority in 1998 (44%) and 1999 (53%) were seniors, followed by intermediates, 29% (1998) and 24%(1999). Juniors represented 27% of the participants in 1998 and 23% in 1999. Slightly over one- half (54%) of the youth participating in 1998 had previously participated in the state fair youth livestock program and 56% were repeat participants in 1999.

Table 1. *Florida State Fair Champion Youth Livestock Entries by Specie Division*

<i>1998(N=377)</i>	<i>1999(N=409)</i>	
Specie	Percent	Percent
Beef Breeding	24.9	23.2
Swine	18.0	22.0
Dairy	16.4	14.9
Sheep	9.8	11.0
Rabbits	10.6	9.3
Steer	10.3	7.3
Poultry	5.3	7.1
Dairy Goats	4.5	5.1
TOTAL	100	100

Youth were asked to list the three things they liked the best about the achievement program. Of the 336 youth responding in 1998: 40% (N=133) liked the money or premiums, 28% (N=95) liked the educational/ knowledge/opportunity to learn aspect and 24% (N=79) liked the skill-a-thon. Slightly less than one-fifth 18% (N=59) liked the volunteering component of the program, 11% (N=37) liked the showmanship/showing component, 4% (N=12) liked the demonstrations/illustrated talks and 7% (N=24) liked the poster component of the program. The 1999 results were similar, but showed an increase in some areas. Approximately one-third (29%) liked the money or premiums and an equal number liked the educational/ knowledge/opportunity to learn aspect. Slightly more than one- fourth, 26%(N=90) liked the skill-a-thon, 23% (N=82) liked the volunteering component of the program, and 20% (N=69) liked the showmanship/ showing component, 9% (N=33) liked the poster and 7% (N=26) liked the demonstration/ illustrated talk components of the program.

One of the most interesting outcomes was in the difference between youth that participated in the state fair in 1998 who had participated in 1997 (no achievement program) and those who were participating for the first time in 1998. Those youth

program over the auction based market animal sale were: everyone has the opportunity to earn money and/or points (money) can be earned by participation in activities (N=50); educational and knowledge gained (N=25); and that they did not have to find buyers (N=14). The top two disadvantages of the achievement program compared to an auction based market animal sale was that there was not as much profit/money to be earned (N= 64) and there is no means to secure support from community or an opportunity to meet buyers (N= 6).

When asked to provide three suggestions for improvement to future achievement programs, youth in 1998 ranked increased opportunities to earn more points/money, more organization/directions, more time to complete activities and no written/easier test as the top suggested four changes for 1999. In the second year of the program the suggested changes shifted substantially. Youth in 1999 ranked more organization/directions (82 with 34 specific references to the skill-a-thons) as their most frequently suggested change. This was followed by increased opportunities to earn more points/money, more time to complete activities and improved facilities. The request for more educational seminars and information completed the list of the five most suggested changes for 2000 (Table 4).

Table 4. *Participant suggestions to enhance future achievement programs*

Item	1998	1999
More points/\$/opportunities to earn	39	53
More directions/better organized	38	82
Knowledge test (no test - too hard)	38	13
More time/too rushed/too crowded	35	40
Facilities (better/need improvement)	25	40
Auction (reinstate)	19	7
Record book change/judging	19	16
Ability to track score	17	13
More educational seminars/information	10	38

The final question on the survey asked participants if they planned to show again at the state fair. Approximately 82% of the youth indicated they would participate in the program in the future. Sixty-two participants (18%) responded negatively, noting they would not show at the fair in the future. Of those 62, fifty or 81% indicated the reason they would not participate is because they would be graduating (non-eligible) or had other time commitments that would not allow them to participate.

Conclusions /Implications

To try to return to the educational emphasis and intent of youth livestock shows, the Florida State Fair eliminated the traditional “auction” program for top market steers and hogs and instituted an Achievement Program in 1998. The Florida State Fair is held each year in mid-February. The Achievement Program recognizes and rewards youth for exhibiting champion animals and for participation and achievement in an assortment of

educational events. Youth have the opportunity to earn achievement points, which are translated into monies proportional to their involvement in these activities (e.g. educational poster, demonstrations, skill-a-thon, written tests, record books, quiz bowls, volunteering to answer questions). Youth participating in this study exhibited animals in

the following divisions: market steer, market hog, dairy, breeding beef, sheep, rabbits, poultry and dairy goats.

While the auction component was removed, youth are rewarded for producing market animals; all market steers and hogs were sold above market price. To account for developmental differences in youth there are three levels of competition, junior (age 8-11), intermediate (age 12-14) and senior (age 15+). The maximum age of participation varies depending on the last year of eligibility of youth depending on their enrollment in 4-H or FFA. This program levels the junior livestock economic “playing field” for all youth, regardless of specie, allowing the top competitor in the rabbit division to earn the same savings bond premium as the top market steer competitor.

The point system is unique for each species given the history behind their respective exhibition standards and end use of the animal (market and breeding). For example, market animals receive points for gain in weight; rabbits on the other hand do not have such a category. Following competition in “point” earning events, the total number of points are tallied for each participant by species. In each species the four individuals with the highest points are rewarded. The champion and 2nd, 3rd and 4th place individual in each species division receive, respectively, a \$1000 bond, \$750 bond, \$500 bond and \$250 bond. In addition to receiving these bonds the top four exhibitors in each species have the opportunity to participate in a “Champion of Champion” contest. This Champion of Champions contest is a round robin contest that tests the participant’s knowledge and skills in the other specie areas. This means, if you were one of the top 4 winners in the market hog division you have to exhibit knowledge and skills in rabbits, breeding beef, market steer, poultry, sheep, dairy and dairy goats. The Champion of Champions wins a \$3000 bond with monetary awards (bonds) given to the next 5 high individuals (Florida State Fair, 1999).

From an educational perspective, the Achievement Program enhances and supports the educational programming of county faculty, 4-H leaders, agricultural education instructors and state faculty to include all components of livestock production, industry issues and the development of leadership and life skills.

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