Adding Value to AAAE Professional Conferences for Agricultural Education Graduate Students

Shannon Arnold[1], JoLynn Miller[2], and Carl Igo[3]
Montana State University
Bozeman, MT 59717

Abstract

Graduate students are a critical component to the agricultural education profession and it is necessary to ensure that conferences provide valuable professional development to its future leaders. The purpose of this descriptive research was to assess Agricultural Education graduate students' perceptions of and to determine the factors influencing attendance at American Association for Agricultural Education conferences. Sixty-six graduate students responded to a national online survey in the fall of 2009 for a 55% response rate. Results of this study indicated networking and employment opportunities were the most important reasons why graduate students attend professional conferences. The majority of graduate students attending conferences were PhD/EdD students pursuing higher education faculty positions. Research paper sessions and professional development workshops were the two highest rated conference activities, while the graduate student meetings and special interest group were ranked the lowest. Qualitative comments indicated the need for additional networking opportunities and more structured needs-based graduate student meetings. These findings offer useful information for AAAE faculty coordinators to plan valuable graduate sessions, programs, and activities at future conferences.

Introduction

Within the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE), members value the importance of professional development, as evidenced by annual conferences within the three regions of the organization, as well as the national conference. A cursory review of conference agendas and conference business meeting minutes revealed that an overwhelming majority of AAAE members attended at least one of the AAAE-sponsored conferences for each of the past several years. Such anecdotal evidence was indicative of the value AAAE members placed on professional development and research-sharing opportunities provided through the various conferences of the organization.

Interestingly, a review of the research paper proceedings and poster presentations for the north-central, southern and western regions as well as the national research conference proceedings revealed numerous authors/presenters were not faculty members, but graduate students. Few would question the value of involving graduate students in these research and innovative-idea sharing opportunities. However, there was a question as to the professional development value of regional and national AAAE conferences, beyond the research and poster sessions, for the graduate students.

VanSandt and Anderson (1992) noted professional conferences provided both personal and professional growth opportunities. "Through meeting new people, you create opportunities for your own growth and build a network of resource people and a support system" (2). Aitkin et al. (2004) listed benefits of professional organization conferences, including sense of identity, recruitment, personal and career development, networking, formal and informal information exchange, and research, teaching and practice connections.

The meeting participation model (Lee and Back, 2008) provided a framework for this study. The model hinges on the concept that association members make meeting participation decisions consciously, therefore "their plan to attend the meeting can be affected or altered through changes in attitude and perceived social norms that contribute to the formation of meeting participation intention" (p. 308). This model is based on and influenced by the Theory of Reasoned Action and the Theory of Planned Behavior. The meeting participation model included five constructs: attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control, destination image, and past experience. Attitude refers to an individual's beliefs about a destination; subjective norm and perceived behavioral control refer to an individual's intention to perform a behavior; destination image refers to the attributes of a destination; and past experience refers to past-meeting participation and its effect on future response. These constructs are considered to be input factors that affect an individual's preference, destination image, and motive to travel. Lee and Back (2008) recommended utilizing strategies to encourage first-time members' attendance as well as to focus on the benefits the sponsoring organizations or individuals receive through allowing meeting attendance. Knight (2002) noted the importance of formal and informal student interactions at conferences, whereby students have the opportunity to share together and

[1]Assistant Professor of Agricultural Education
[2]Graduate Assistant in Agricultural Education
[3]Associate Professor of Agricultural Education

discuss with one another what they have gleaned from conference sessions. Additionally, Knight noted the students had opportunities to meet future professional colleagues. Apul and Tufenkji (2007) reported graduate students desired access to regional and national conferences for similar reasons to Aitkin et al. (2004): networking, real-world experience, targeted membership, and organizational service. Further, conferences were listed as one of the key reasons graduate students would join a professional organization. Perhaps most interesting was the Apul and Tufenkji finding that graduate students perceived networking as not only interacting professionally with professionals and faculty members, but also connecting with other students.

The American Society of Horticultural Sciences (ASHS) provided a workshop for graduate and undergraduate students attending the 2008 ASHS professional conference. The pre-conference workshop, facilitated by an ASHS member, targeted undergraduate and graduate students with information about the various components of the conference so the students could "gain the most from their conference experience" (ASHS, 2008, p. 1054). An additional student-oriented workshop during the annual ASHS conference sponsored by the ASHS Collegiate Activities Committee was entitled *Student Career Forum: Options, Q & A, …*, with the objective "to expose students to some of the career options in horticulture and provide a forum for students to ask questions and get answers from a panel of professionals in horticulture" (p. 1061).

Barrick et al. (2006) discovered faculty and graduate student agreement on the importance of faculty members providing opportunities for graduate students to attend professional meetings. However, the data revealed graduate students perceived the faculty members should be more proactive in providing those professional development opportunities. Additionally, Barrick et al. reported graduate students believed their ideas were not treated with due respect by faculty mentors and that graduate students preferred to receive more assistance in preparing publications.

Other researchers acknowledged the importance of helping graduate students develop research skills (House and Sterns, 2003; Shelton et al., 2006). Likewise, the importance of preparing graduate students outside classroom settings was noted by McKenna et al. (1993) and Skelly et al. (2002). However, the focus was primarily on field and laboratory operations rather than professional development and peer contact. Mentoring was noted as essential in the faculty member-graduate student relationship (Dodson et al., 2006; Kilmer et al., 1997; Shelton et al., 2006); however this was not included in professional conferences as part of the mentorship process. Based on the involvement of master's and doctoral level graduate students in regional and national Agricultural Education professional conferences, the importance of such involvement for the professional and career development of the students was accepted. However, there was little evidence regarding the best practices for accomplishing that professional development and career mentoring.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this research was to assess agricultural education graduate students' perceptions and to determine the factors influencing attendance at the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) regional and national conferences. This purpose was accomplished through the following specific objectives:

1. Determine selected demographic characteristics of graduate students who attended the AAAE regional and national conferences in 2008-2009;
2. Determine the graduate student attendees perceptions of professional development activities at AAAE regional and national conferences in 2008-2009;
3. Determine graduate students attendance patterns at AAAE regional and national conferences in 2008-2009
4. Determine participants' perceptions of graduate student meetings at AAAE regional and national conferences in 2008-2009.

Methods

The population for this study was graduate students who attended a regional and/or national agricultural education affiliated professional conference in 2008-2009. A census of 127 participants was obtained from the official list of attendees provided by each regional conference chair and the national chair. Due to inaccurate and incomplete lists, the final sample consisted of 120 graduate students. The instrument was researcher-developed based upon needs and curiosities of agricultural education faculty and graduate students at Montana State University. The instrument was designed on SurveyMonkey™ with specific focus on how to add value to professional conference participation for graduate students. Questions were derived from literature on conference participation and student professional development (American Society for Horticultural Science, 2008; Skelly et al., 2002; VanZandt and Andersen, 1992). Survey questions were created to determine attendance patterns at AAAE conferences, opinions on the conference sessions and activities, factors that added or decreased value to conference experiences, and gain insight into professional development opportunities. The survey was assessed for validity by a panel of university faculty. Ten agricultural education graduate students who have previously attended a national AAAE conference participated in a pilot test to assess reliability. A Cronbach's alpha was also

calculated on the instrument and revealed a reliability coefficient of 0.81. Following the validity and reliability assessments, several questions were restructured.

Data Collection

The Montana State University Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol and all participants provided voluntary consent online prior to completing the survey and participating in the study. This study was deemed exempt by Montana State University IRB. The survey was disseminated using the web-based host SurveyMonkey™ and consisted of 25 questions divided into four sections. Section one centered on participants' graduate program background and sought to determine their participation levels in professional conferences. Sections two and three included specific questions about participation in a 2008-2009 AAAE Regional Conference and/or the 2009 AAAE National Conference. These two sections assessed respondents' perceptions of the value of conference sessions and activities. The last section focused on participants' insight into ideas for future conferences. Researchers utilized a modified version of Dillman's (2000) tailored design method. An introductory email was sent via SurveyMonkey™ to 120 graduate students who met the criteria of having attended a regional and/or national AAAE conference in 2008-2009. This correspondence informed potential participants they had been selected for the study and included background information about the study, the informed consent form, and a web link to the survey. Participants gave voluntary consent by clicking on the link to complete the survey. One university blocked emails from SurveyMonkey™, therefore a copy of the email was sent through a personal email and responses were combined in the results section. The survey remained active for 30 days and non-responders/late responders were sent two reminder emails two weeks apart. Because the response rate was less than 80%, researchers chose to contact 5 to 10% of the sample to gather data to address the non-response as recommended by Tuckman (1999). A random sample of 10 non-respondents was contacted via personal email to answer critical questions on the survey. After comparing answers, no differences were found between respondents and non-respondents in a way relevant to the study.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 18.0 software package, Microsoft Excel, and SurveyMonkey™. The data collection period was from September 22, 2009, to October 22, 2009. Responses were filtered through SurveyMonkey™ to only include current graduate students during the 2008-2009 school year and fully completed surveys. After eliminating duplicates and partial responses, the survey yielded a 55.0% (N=66) response rate. SurveyMonkey™ allowed the researchers to report descriptive statistics by providing charts and graphs based on each question. For further analysis, data were downloaded into Microsoft Excel and SPSS to calculate means, standard deviations, and reliability coefficients.

Results

Objective 1: *Determine selected demographic characteristics of graduate students who attended the AAAE regional and national conferences in 2008-2009.*

Based on registration lists obtained from regional and national conference coordinators, 120 graduate students comprised the study sample. All respondents were enrolled as graduate students during a semester or quarter of the 2008-2009 school year. Twenty-eight percent of the respondents (n=19) were Master's students; 63.6% (n=42) were PhD/EdD students; and 7.6% (n=5) were in combined Master's and Doctorate programs.

The suggested length of participants' graduate programs was reported as 1-2 years by 27.3% of respondents (n=18); 2-3 years by 25.8% (n=17); 3-4 years by 40.9% (n=27); 4-5 years by 4.5% (n=3); and more than 5 years by 1.5% (n=1). When asked about the number of semesters completed in graduate school, 18.2% (n=12) completed 1-2 semesters; 40.9% (n=27) completed 3-4 semesters; 15.1% (n=10) completed 5-6 semesters; 9.1% (n=6) completed more than 6 semesters; and 16.7% (n=11) had completed all degree requirements. Participants were asked to identify their career goals and research topic areas. The career goals reported were as follows: 19.7% (n=13) were pursuing extension, 16.7% (n=11) were pursuing high school teacher or administrator; 16.7% (n=11) were pursuing industry positions; 12.1% (n=8) were pursuing non-profit work; 15.2% (n=10) were pursuing government; 15.2% (n=10) were pursuing PhD/EdD programs; 72.7% (n=48) were pursuing higher education faculty; and 15.2% (n=10)

Table 1. Graduate Student Research Topic Areas According to National Research Priority Agenda (N=66)

Topic	*f*	%
Agricultural Education in University and Postsecondary Settings	16	24.2
Agricultural Education in Schools	13	19.7
Agricultural Communications	12	18.2
Agricultural Education in Dom. & Int. Settings: Extension and Outreach	10	15.2
Agricultural Leadership	9	13.6
Other	4	6.1
Undecided	2	3.0

were pursuing international development. Respondents were asked to categorize their research topic into one of the National Research Priority Areas (Table 1).

Objective 2: *Determine the graduate student attendees' perceptions of professional development activities at AAAE regional and national conferences in 2008-2009.*

Participants were asked to rate the usefulness of regional conference activities to professional development using a 5-point Likert-type scale (Table 2). Means and standard deviations were calculated. Only 51 respondents answered this question because 15 had not attended a regional conference. If respondents did not attend the conference activity or if the activity was not offered, they were not included in the final calculations.

Participants were asked to rate the usefulness of national conference activities to professional development using a 5-point Likert-type scale (Table 3). Means and standard deviations were calculated. Only 35 respondents answered this question because 31 had not attended the national conference. If participants did not attend the conference activity, they were not included in the final calculations.

Objective 3: *Determine graduate students' attendance patterns at AAAE regional and national conferences in 2008-2009.*

Of the 66 total respondents, 34 (54%) were affiliated with the Southern Region, 18 (28.6%) were affiliated with the North Central Region, and 11 (17.5%) were affiliated with the Western Region. Forty-three respondents (65.1%) reported having attended one or two AAAE conferences, while 33 respondents (39.3%) had attended 3-5+ conferences. When asked about attendance at all professional conferences (AAAE and others), 22 respondents (34.9%) had attended more than five, 31 respondents (49.1%) had attended two to four, and 10 respondents (15.8%) had attended either one or five. In a check-all-that-apply format, participants were asked the types of all professional conferences attended (Table 4). Fifty-one (81.0%) of the respondents attended a Regional AAAE conference in 2008-2009. In a "mark-all-that-apply" format, participants marked the reasons for attending the regional conference (Table 5).

Attendance for professional conferences was supported by a combination of the following funds listed in descending order: department (82.4%), personal (58.8%), grants (15.7%), university (11.8%), college (9.8%), and other (9.8%).

Table 2. Usefulness of Regional Conference Activities to Graduate Student Professional Development (N=51)

Activity: Likert Scale	1		2		3		4		5			
	f	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	Mean	SD
Research Paper Sessions	0	0	1	2.0	10	19.6	20	39.2	19	37.4	4.14	0.81
Prof. Dev. Workshops	0	0	4	7.8	7	13.7	11	21.6	9	21.6	3.81	1.01
Arranged Social Events	1	2.0	4	7.8	11	21.6	20	39.2	10	19.6	3.80	0.89
Arranged Local Tours	1	2.0	2	3.9	6	11.8	16	31.4	7	13.7	3.80	0.97
Professional Seminars	0	0	4	7.8	10	19.6	13	25.5	9	17.6	3.75	0.97
Poster Session	0	0	4	7.8	17	33.3	23	45.1	3	5.9	3.53	0.75
General Session	0	0	6	11.8	17	33.3	16	31.4	7	13.7	3.47	0.97
Graduate Student Meeting	0	0	10	19.6	4	7.8	12	23.5	6	11.8	3.44	1.13
Business Meeting	3	5.9	5	9.8	19	37.3	11	21.6	2	3.9	3.10	0.96

Note. On a 5-point Likert-type scale, 1=Not useful, 2=Somewhat useful, 3=Useful, 4=Very Useful, 5=Extremely Useful

Table 3. Usefulness of National Conference Activities to Graduate Student Professional Development (N=35)

Conference Activity	1		2		3		4		5			
	f	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	Mean	SD
Research Paper Sessions	0	0	1	2.9	2	5.7	13	37.1	18	51.4	4.41	0.74
Prof. Dev. Workshops	0	0	0	0	6	17.1	8	22.9	17	48.6	4.35	0.80
Alumni Events	1	2.9	1	2.9	3	8.6	11	31.4	10	28.6	4.08	1.02
Professional Seminars	0	0	2	5.7	4	11.4	11	31.4	6	17.1	3.91	0.90
Arranged Social Events	0	0	2	5.7	5	14.3	19	54.3	5	14.3	3.87	0.76
Committee/SIG/Bus. Mtg	0	0	1	2.9	9	25.7	13	37.1	7	20.0	3.87	0.82
Poster Session	0	0	3	8.6	5	14.3	22	62.9	3	8.6	3.76	0.75
Opening Session	0	0	5	14.3	8	22.9	9	25.7	9	25.7	3.71	1.07
Graduate Student Meeting	1	2.9	5	14.3	10	28.6	5	14.3	2	5.7	3.09	0.97

Note. On a 5-point Likert-type scale, 1=Not useful, 2=Somewhat useful, 3=Useful, 4=Very Useful, 5=Extremely Useful

Objective 4: *Determine participants' perceptions of graduate student meetings at AAAE regional and national conferences in 2008-2009.*

Twenty-nine respondents (56.9%) indicated their regional conference had a specific time for a graduate student meeting, and 70.6% of these (n=24) attended this meeting. When asked to categorize the meeting, 23 respondents (85.2%) described it as a meet and greet/social; 11 respondents (40.7%) had guest speakers at the meeting; four respondents (14.8%) described it as professional development; three respondents (11.1%) described it as other; and one respondent (3.7%) described it as service learning.

Thirty-five (55.6%) respondents attended the National AAAE conference in 2008-2009 while 28 did

Table 4. Professional Conferences Attended by Graduate Students (N=66)

Conference	*f*	%
American Association of Agricultural Education (AAAE)	62	98.4
Other*	24	38.1
North American College and Teachers of Agriculture (NACTA)	19	30.2
Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE)	11	17.5
Association for International Agricultural and Extension Education (AIAEE)	8	12.7
Association for Communication Excellence (ACE)	8	12.7
Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT)	7	11.1
Association of Leadership Educators (ALE)	6	9.5

*Other included State AgEd Conferences, NAAE, SAAS, NAE4-HA, ASABE, NIFS, ATE, MANRRS, AMS, Outreach Scholarship Conference

Table 5. Graduate Students' Reasons for Attendance at Regional Conferences (N=51)

Categories	*f*	%
Professional Networking	37	72.5
To learn about research	27	52.9
To present a poster	27	52.9
To present a paper	25	49.0
Non-professional reasons*	14	27.5
Other	3	5.9
Class requirement	1	2.0

*Non-professional reasons included to visit friends, see a new town, location, etc…

not. Of these 35 participants, 21 (60.0%) attended the graduate student meeting. In a forced choice question format, participants ranked the importance of graduate student meeting activities on a 6-point Likert-type scale (Table 6).

When asked how graduate student meetings should be structured at future conferences, participants ranked the following choices in descending order: 59% (n=36) desired a meet and greet at the beginning of the conference; 58.3% (n=35) desired various sessions throughout the conference; 56.7% (n=34) desired a graduate session during a business meeting; and 55.2% (n=32) desired all graduate students to sit together during a meal. Additionally, 69.8% of the respondents (n=44) also indicated they would like to have one to two graduate student activities during a professional conference.

In a short answer format, participants were asked how graduate student meetings could be improved at professional conferences (Table 7). Comments from 26 respondents were summarized into three themes: (a) Adding more structure and content to graduate student meetings by having a formal agenda, leadership, planned program activities, and useful information to take home; (b) Focus the meeting on needs-based topics to improve professional development, research, and teaching skills in order to better prepare students for future careers; and, (c) Provide additional formal and informal networking opportunities for graduate students to interact with each other and faculty members.

Discussion

Professional networking was considered the most important reason graduate students attend professional conferences confirming the research of VanSandt and Anderson (1992). Graduate students placed repeated emphasis on this factor throughout the survey. Although students can participate in scheduled conference activities, it is also important that they have time to visit informally with faculty during the conference. Faculty should acknowledge the significance placed on developing personal and professional relationships and strive to frequently interact with graduate students in different ways. This interaction can be done formally in conference sessions, meetings, workshops, and panel discussions, as well as informally at social activities, tours, and session breaks. These opportunities allow for information exchange and assist in building relationships that can benefit both faculty and students in the future. Conference coordinators should consider including these types of events in the schedule in order to provide both formal and informal networking opportunities.

Beyond networking, other closely ranked reasons to attend conferences were to learn about research and present a paper or poster. These findings reinforce the value of graduate student involvement at the conference beyond attendance. These unique opportunities help to build confidence, improve research skills, create a sense of identity, establish professional connections, and enhance the overall graduate program experience (Aitkin et al., 2004).

The majority (63.6%) of graduate students attending conferences was PhD/EdD students, and when asked about career goals, 72.7% indicated that they were pursuing higher education faculty positions. With this high number of doctoral students pursuing professional positions, it is critical that conference coordinators allow time for graduate students to visit with faculty about career opportunities; this time also offers an excellent opportunity for faculty recruitment (Aitkin et al., 2004). Additionally, the inclusion of a career workshop, similar to the 2008 American Society of Horticultural Sciences conference that exposes students to professional options and allows them to ask faculty questions could be a valuable experience.

All participants rated the same top two conference activities as being very to extremely useful for professional development. The highest rated activities were research paper sessions and professional development workshops. Therefore, graduate students should continue to be encouraged by advisors to submit and present papers at conferences in order to gain experience and establish their professional identity. Professional development workshops should also incorporate topics valuable to both faculty and graduate students and possibly be

Table 6. Importance of Graduate StudentMeeting Activities at National AAAE Conference (N=35)

Conference Activity	1		2		3		4		5		6			
	f	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	Mean	SD
Networking	3	5.7	4	7.5	4	7.5	11	20.8	16	30.2	15	28.3	4.47	1.46
Employment Opp.	8	14.3	5	8.9	6	10.7	9	16.1	14	25.0	14	25.0	4.04	1.75
Research Assistance	3	5.9	7	13.7	16	31.4	9	17.6	7	13.7	9	17.6	3.73	1.48
Prof. Skill Development	3	5.4	12	21.4	11	19.6	15	26.8	8	14.3	7	12.5	3.61	1.44
Educational Seminars	4	7.5	16	30.2	12	22.6	6	11.3	10	18.9	5	9.4	3.32	1.50
Graduate Student Special Interest Grp.	29	46.8	8	12.9	6	9.7	7	11.3	7	11.3	5	8.1	2.52	1.76

Note. On a 6-point Likert-type scale, 1=Not important, 2=Somewhat important, 3=Important, 4=Moderately Important, 5=Very Important, 6=Extremely Important

Table 7. Participants' Ideas for Improving Graduate Student Meetings at Conferences (N=26)

Themes
More structure and content
"Have more than one graduate student meeting"
"Better promotion and organization of graduate student meetings prior to conference
"Have presentations, handouts and take home materials that may help grad students when they go back home"
"Have a designated student leader to serve as a point person for students"
"Provide more structured events, meetings, and activities led by faculty member or experienced graduate student"
"Make them more than a meet and greet. Add some substance to the program and make it meaningful to be there"
"Have a formal agenda for graduate student meetings. A well-thought out program would allow students to receive proper benefit after leveraging time to attend"
Needs-based meeting topics
"Survey the graduate students to determine interests"
"Create a meaningful program"
"Have a specific professional development session for graduate students"
"Keep sessions for graduate students with an objective to improve their professional skills and research skills for the future when they will work as faculty or educators"
"Provide incentives with unique opportunities for attendance and be creative with rewards"
"Sending out questionnaires like this one to see what are the needs of graduate students"
"Give graduate students something useful to walk away with. Something unique that they can't get at their home campus"
Provide additional networking opportunities
"Create a more accepting atmosphere of graduate students that encourages interaction"
"Have more organized social activities"
"Allow more time for graduate student interaction. The current meetings are rushed and there is little time to converse"
"I would also like to see activities that allow graduate students and professionals to meet and greet/network; I would also like to see more focus on pairing students with professionals in a mentoring relationship for added assistance"
"Schedule small get-together activities. The "parking lot" conversations have been most beneficial"
"Make the meetings more informal"
"Encourage all regions to include graduate student meetings as a time to network and socialize"

divided into two separate sessions. It might be useful for faculty to submit separate professional development workshop proposals so that the sessions can meet the specific needs of each audience. The lowest rated activity at regional conferences was the business meeting and was ranked by more than half of the respondents as the desired time to offer a graduate session. These results indicate this could be an appropriate time to offer a professional development session specifically for graduate students.

At the national conference, the graduate student meeting was the lowest ranked activity, while 59.7% of respondents also rated the graduate student special interest group as least important. This data indicates the need to re-examine the quality and focus of these graduate student events. If conference coordinators are to provide valuable career and professional development for graduate students, then faculty must reconsider the needs of graduate students at professional conferences and structure activities to better educate its future leaders. Further research on the professional and career development needs of graduate students can assist in providing a direction for coordinators as they plan regional and national conference agendas.

Comments indicated the need for more structured and topic-based graduate student meetings. The development of a student leadership team that provides direction to the overall graduate program could be used to plan meeting content, events, and networking opportunities each year. The idea of creating a newsletter might also be an additional opportunity for students to contribute to the organization and collaborate with faculty. This graduate leadership structure has been successful in other organizations, such as the Association of International Agricultural and Extension Education, and should be considered for AAAE members as well. More than 50% of the respondents stated that they would like to have a meet and greet, multiple sessions, a graduate session during a business meeting, and a meal when all graduate students sit together. Coordinators should include these kinds of events in the schedule to maximize the value of the conference for graduate students. A separate evaluation for graduate student attendees should be conducted at the end of conferences to evaluate the success and value of these activities.

The results of this graduate student study corroborated the meeting participation model (Lee and Back, 2008), most especially the constructs of attitude, perceived behavioral control, and destination image. These constructs should be taken into

consideration during promotion of the conference. Conference organizers should emphasize the personal and professional benefits of the location, entertainment, networking opportunities, conference content, guest speakers, and various activities to highlight the destination image. Highlighting previous participants' conference experiences, possibly through videos, evaluations, quotations, or pictures, could also influence attitudes and motive to attend. Hosts should also provide an overview of conference outcomes and evaluations, as well as a detailed agenda of future expectations, to help produce positive behavioral beliefs in participants.

Networking and employment opportunities were ranked as the most important activities at the national conference; therefore additional focus should be placed on how to improve these targeted areas. As mentioned, formal and informal opportunities to network and socialize should be incorporated into the agenda. The establishment of structured graduate student meetings as well as informal social events can assist in providing the time for this desired interaction. The creation of a faculty- student or student-student mentoring program might also encourage relationship building important for future employment. Mentoring programs can provide an essential link to prepare graduate students for the agricultural education profession and its future leadership. All conferences offer a unique outlet for interactions between faculty and graduate students and should continually be reassessed to determine how to improve the experience for attendees. As Apul and Tufenkji (2007) reported, graduate students attend conferences to network and gain real-world experiences; therefore, it is the responsibility of the organizational members to create these valuable opportunities for participants.

Summary

Results of this study indicated networking and employment opportunities were the most important reasons why graduate students attend professional conferences. The majority of graduate students attending AAAE conferences were PhD/EdD students pursuing higher education faculty positions. Research paper sessions and professional development workshops were the two highest rated conference activities, while the graduate student meetings and special interest group were ranked the lowest. Qualitative comments indicated the need for additional networking opportunities and more structured needs-based graduate student meetings. These findings offer useful information for faculty coordinators in all disciplines to plan valuable graduate sessions, programs, and activities at future conferences.

Literature Cited

Aitken, M.D., J.T. Novak, G.W.Characklis, K.L. Jones, and P.J. Vikesland. 2004. The evolution of environmental engineering as a professional discipline. Environmental Engineering Science 21(2): 117-123. DOI: 10.1089/109287504 773087291.

American Society for Horticultural Science. 2008. ASHS Primer: Attending a professional conference. HortScience 43(4): 1054.

Apul, D. and N. Tufenkji. 2007. Student expectations from an environmental professional society. Environmental Engineering Science 24(9): 1201-1217. DOI: 10.1089/ees.2007.0002.

Barrick, K., R.W. Clark, and L.C. Blaschek. 2006. Current and expected roles of graduate student faculty mentors. NACTA Journal 50(1): 6-9.

Dillman, D.A. 2000. Mail and internet surveys: The tailored design method. 2nd ed. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.

Dodson, M.V., M.E. Fernyhough, and B.B. Holman. 2006. Advising graduate students: Mentor or Tormentor? NACTA Journal 50(4): 37-41.

House, L. and J. Sterns. 2003. What are agricultural economics Ph.D. students learning about agribusiness research methods and subject areas? NACTA Journal 47(2): 31-35.

Kilmer, R. L., T.S. Hoover, and L.J. Connor. 1997. University of Florida College of Agriculture graduate student opinion survey. NACTA Journal 41(3): 19-25.

Knight, G.J. 2002. Never too soon: Music ed students at professional conferences. Teaching Music 9(5): 46-50. http://search.ebscohost.com/ login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=6610057&loginpage=login.asp&site=ehost-live.

Lee, M.L. and K. Back. 2008. Association meeting participation: A test of competing models. Journal of Travel Research 48: 300-310. DOI: 10.1177/0047287507308320.

McKenna, J.R., S.T. Reed, J.P. Fulcher, and R.N. Mankolo. 1993. Preparation for professional responsibilities. NACTA Journal 37(2): 11-12.

Shelton, M.D., J.J. Ahern, D.D. Piirto, and A. England. 2006. Perceptions of agriculture and natural resource M.S. graduates regarding program quality and learning outcomes attainment. NACTA Journal 50(3): 45-50.

Skelly, S.M., T.C. Kohlleppel, M.E. Kane, and J.C. Bradley. 2002. Professional development for graduate students. NACTA Journal 46(4): 16-18.

Tuckman, B.W. 1999. Conducting educational research. 5th ed. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace.

VanZandt, C.E. and P.J. Andersen. 1992. Making the most of professional conferences: Beyond sweaty palms and boring meetings. School Counselor 39(4): 263-268. http://web.ebscohost.com.