

A Comparison of Ideal and Realistic Career Choices Among Farm Youth

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Abstract

This paper reports on the career aspirations of a sample of male students from farm backgrounds attending Iowa State University. Data on students' "ideal" and "realistic" career choices are presented and systematically compared for consistency. Overall, the consistency ratings are reasonably high between students' ideal and realistic career choices, but the data reveal a sizeable number of individuals who would ideally like to enter farming but feel blocked from doing so by existing social and economic factors. Data germane to other agriculturally-related career paths are also presented along with a discussion of the implications of the findings for the land grant university.

Background

During the past fifty years, American agriculture has undergone a fundamental transformation characterized by an increasing concentration of production, a growing dependence on mechanization, a substitution of capital for labor, and a trend toward greater specialization of production among farm enterprises.

During this time, the rural farm population has continuously declined from a high of 31.5 million, or 29.9 % of the nation's population in 1920, to roughly 5.5 million, or 2.5% of the nation's population in 1980 (Fuguitt, Brown, and Beale, 1989:304).

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To account for the dramatic population declines in rural areas due to rural outmigration, Garkovich (1989) uses the concept of "surplus population," according to which a high rate of natural increase (which was characteristic of rural populations in the first half of the 20th century) and a changing demand for labor (brought on by increasing mechanization in agriculture) created a surplus rural labor pool forced to search for alternatives. These "push" factors, along with positive wage differentials, increased certainty of income, and the diversity of lifestyles provided by urban areas, were used by sociologists and others to help account for the substantial rural to urban population migration observed during this period.

During the early 1980s, the nation faced a deep agricultural recession, or the so-called "farm crisis," precipitated by a combination of inflationary pressures, high debt loads, escalating interest rates, low commodity prices, and declining farmland values (Kirkendall, 1991). The farm crisis occurred after a period of relative strength in the agricultural economy and a leveling off of farm population losses in the 60s and 70s; but it is now projected when final census counts are available that the farm population will drop to 4.7 million by the end of the 1980s, a population loss of some 22 percent during the decade (Fuguitt, Brown, and Beale, 1989:306).

The farm economic crisis has brought into sharp focus the realities of the changing opportunity structure in agriculture. Yet there is a paucity of research dealing with the direct impact of these changing environmental and societal conditions on the career aspirations and expectations of farm youth in a university setting. Lyson argues that such research is needed because

"...proportionately more farm-reared men are going to college than at any previous time to prepare for agricultural careers in general and farming careers in particular. These young men may represent the leading edge and be the vanguard of tomorrow's rural farm sector. As farming becomes increasingly specialized and complex, a college education may be required to supplement and complement the fundamental skills and practical knowledge learned on the farm" (Lyson, 1979:788).

The research reported here is part of a larger study assessing the impact of the farm crisis on male college students' choice of farming as a career. Specifically, it attempts to compare "ideal" career aspirations of male university students from farm backgrounds with their assess-

ments of "realistic" career goals and to assess the degree of convergence between them. It is anticipated that the results should help instructors, academic advisors, placement personnel, and administrators to understand the career expectations and motivations of students in the nation's land grant universities.

Methods and Sample

Mail questionnaires were sent to 1200 Iowa State University students and their parents in late 1987-early 1988. The sampled names were selected from among all actively enrolled male students with rural route addresses. As a result, the names in the sample represented several undergraduate colleges and majors. Although the greatest percentage of the final sample was enrolled in the College of Agriculture (44 percent), respondents were also matriculated in the Colleges of Engineering, Business, and Liberal Arts and Sciences. Of course, not all students with rural route addresses come from farming backgrounds, so screening questions were included to eliminate those students with nonfarm backgrounds from the final sample. An overall response rate of 62 percent was obtained, but the findings reported here are based on the 456 students (38 percent) whose parents also returned a completed survey.

Ideal and realistic career choices are the central focus of this analysis. The operational measures used to tap these dimensions are two parallel questions asking the respondents, first, "Given the ideal situation where everything would work according to your wishes, how would you rank the following five statements on career choice?" and second, "With the existence of certain social and economic conditions, people are sometimes unable to pursue their ideal careers. Given the realities of current conditions, how would you rank each of the following five statements as they relate to your own career plans?"

The same set of responses used for both questions was (a) to enter farming on a full-time basis upon graduation, (b) to enter farming on a part-time basis upon graduation, (c) to pursue an off-farm career upon graduation and to return to farming later on, (d) to pursue a non-farm agricultural career upon graduation (e.g. ag sales, marketing, and government), and (e) to pursue a nonfarm nonagricultural career upon graduation. The choices form a rough continuum ranging from full-time farming to a completely nonagricultural career.

Findings

Before assessing the convergence between ideal and realistic career choices, a few descriptive background statistics will be provided. More than half of the students reported that the farm crisis had affected their educational plans to at least some extent. Fifty-six percent of the students reported that the farm crisis had affected their future career plans. At the same time, 55 percent disagreed with the suggestion that few opportunities exist in farming today. Similarly, 54 percent expressed the hope that the future of agriculture still holds promise. Sixteen percent stated that they would have gone directly into farming out of high

school had the farming situation been better.

The major variable used in this paper centers on the student's decision to enter farming instead of other general careers. The respondents were asked to indicate their "ideal" career choice and the career choice that they "realistically" felt that they would achieve. Regarding their ideal occupational choice, 24 percent of the students indicated that they would elect to enter full-time farming directly after graduation from college. Another six percent ranked farming part-time after graduation as their ideal choice. Some 22 percent indicated that they would choose an off-farm career after graduation and then would return to farming later on. Seventeen percent stated their preference for a nonfarm agricultural career (e.g., agribusiness) after graduation, and 34 percent would, under ideal conditions, choose a nonfarm nonagricultural career upon graduation.

Regarding their "realistic" career alternatives, a different pattern from that reported for ideal choices emerges. For example, only seven percent expected that they would actually enter full-time farming upon graduation. Another five percent stated that they would likely enter part-time farming after college. Roughly 22 percent expected to pursue an off-farm career and then return to farming later. Similarly, 23 percent expected to pursue a nonfarm agricultural career. But 46 percent realistically expected to pursue a nonfarm nonagricultural career after graduating from college.

To assess the nature of the relations between the ideal and the realistic career choices, the two sets of ten ideal and realistic career choice variables were collapsed into two categorical variables. For each respondent, only the ideal and the realistic career choices with the number one ranking were chosen and compared in the analysis. The resulting cross tabulation, presented in Table 1, allowed a comparison of the respondents' two choices and of the level of consistency between them.

As indicated by the rather large number of observations distributed on the diagonal (upper left to lower right), there is a reasonably strong linear pattern between the respondents' ideal and realistic career choices (Table 1). Interestingly, the cells below the diagonal are virtually void of responses. One implication of this pattern is that very few of those choosing something other than full-time farming as an

Table 1. Crosstabulation of the Ideal and Realistic Career Choices.

Ideal Choices	Rfull-time 1	Rpart-time 2	Roff-farm 3	Rnon-fara 4	Rnon-fana 5	Row Total
Ifull-time (1)	30 (28%)	10 (9%)	40 (38%)	16 (15%)	11 (10%)	107 (24%)
Ipart-time (2)	1 (34%)	4 (15%)	6 (23%)	4 (16%)	11 (42%)	26 (56%)
Ioff-farm (3)	1 (1%)	3 (3%)	47 (48%)	22 (23%)	24 (25%)	97 (21%)
Inon-fara (4)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	57 (76%)	16 (22%)	75 (16%)
Inon-fana (5)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (22%)	4 (23%)	143 (95%)	151 (33%)
Column Total	33 (7%)	18 (34%)	97 (21%)	103 (23%)	205 (45%)	456 (100%)

ideal career choice felt that they would be constrained to enter farming. For example, of the 151 respondents who stated that their ideal vocation was nonfarm, nonagricultural in nature, none indicated that they would realistically end up in farming, either full-time or part-time. This finding leaves the incongruent groups mainly distributed above the diagonal. This pattern is probably an accurate reflection of the changing opportunity and demographic structure of modern-day American agriculture.

The diagonal distribution represents the respondents who are consistent in the rankings of their ideal and realistic career choices. For example, the top left cell indicates that 28 percent of those who ranked full-time farming as their number one ideal vocational choice felt that they would realistically end up in full-time farming. An even larger percentage of this group (38 percent), however, indicated that, realistically, they would probably return to farming at a later date, indicating the existence of two primary paths for those who desired to enter farming. The part-time category represents the lowest consistency level between ideal and realistic choices (15 percent). This low consistency level may be partly due to the low number of respondents choosing this alternative as their either ideal or realistic career option.

The remainder of the consistent groups on the diagonal regularly increases in magnitude. The consistency rate for the ideal and realistic choice of entering an off-farm job upon graduation and returning to farming later on was 48 percent, whereas the consistency rate for the ideal and realistic choice of a non-farm agricultural career upon graduation was 76 percent. Finally, the highest consistency occurred among those ideally and realistically selecting a nonfarm, nonagricultural career upon graduation; their consistency rate was 95 percent.

Half of the sample (51 percent) ideally wanted to engage in farming (either full-time, part-time, or returning to farming later on), but only 32 percent listed any of these options as their realistic first choice. On the other hand, 33 percent of the respondents expressed a desire to enter a nonfarm, nonagricultural career, but 45 percent realistically felt that they would end up there. Both of these findings indicate that more persons have aspirations for farming than can be realistically absorbed into the present structure.

Among those who would ideally choose to enter full-time farming, 75 percent felt that they would realistically end up in some type of farming at some time. Interestingly, the greatest percentage of respondents in this category felt that they would enter farming later on (38 percent). This finding may indicate that the respondents were waiting for better times or waiting until their resources were such that farming could be seen as a more realistic alternative. Overall, this group seemed optimistic, even though the findings signal a significant pattern of deferred gratification. The fact that this great a percentage of those whose ideal was full-time farming realistically felt that they would return to farming at a later time might suggest a respecification of the rungs on the traditional "agricultural ladder."

A comparatively small group (6 percent) aspired to an

initial part-time farming situation. Of this group, only 15 percent felt that their chances for part-time farming were realistic. The largest group (42 percent) listed their first realistic choice as a nonfarm, nonagricultural career, which conceivably could be used as a resource base to enter their ideal of part-time farming.

A surprisingly great percentage of the sample (21 percent) would idealistically like to pursue a nonfarm job and to return to farming later. As stated, almost 50 percent of this group showed consistency between the ideal and the real. By and large, this group seemed to have given up any realistic hope of either full or part-time farming at the present time. In addition to the 48 percent consistency demonstrated in this group, almost all other realistic responses were divided between the nonfarm agricultural and non-farm, nonagricultural categories.

For those whose ideal career was an agricultural but nonfarm career alternative, there is a rather high degree of consistency with their realistic expectations. As pointed out earlier, over three-fourths of the group that ideally wanted to enter a nonfarm agricultural career felt that they would realistically do so. These individuals were quite content with a career in agriculture, but not in production agriculture, and they probably represent a group with strong agricultural backgrounds, who see a future in agriculture, but who may be unwilling to assume the risks, uncertainties, or life-styles of a career in production agriculture.

The last category, representing those who selected non-agricultural careers as their ideal choice, has always been an important alternative for farm youth. For one reason or another, there have always been farm children who have opted for alternative career paths. There is a higher consistency pattern, by a rather wide margin, between the ideal and real choices for this group (95 percent) than for any of the other categories. This finding means that persons in this group perceived that they would have a higher success rate than those in any of the other categories in realizing their ideal. Because this is an extremely broad category, however, this high consistency rating does not mean that persons in this group would proceed without frustrations in pursuing their ideal career, but, in broad strokes, it does signal a general pattern of consistency.

Conclusions and Implications

To gain an adequate understanding of social and occupational mobility, the investigator must go beyond the level of individual decision making and attempt to account for broader structural factors. This research attempts to go beyond a simple "what do you want to do when you grow up?" model by comparing ideal career aspirations with the individual's realistic assessment of the opportunity structure and their possible place within it.

In assessing the relation between ideal and realistic career aspirations, a relatively congruent pattern emerges. Especially, in the broad areas of nonfarm, nonagricultural and non-farm, agricultural careers, there is a high rate of consistency between the respondents' ideal and realistic career aspirations. When it comes to the more specific ca-

University of Idaho Students' Perceptions Of Agriculture and Careers in Agriculture

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The purpose of this study was to assess the perceptions that University of Idaho students held about agriculture and careers in agriculture. An open-ended questionnaire was administered to a cross-section of the campus student population. This study indicated a general lack of understanding by college students of what agriculture entails today and what careers are available in the field. A concentrated effort to educate the general public about the modern agriculture industry and the wide array of agricultural careers available is desperately needed to ensure that the agriculture industry will continue to prosper.

Introduction

Enrollment in agricultural colleges and universities has declined in the last decade. A report by the Human Capital Task Force (1988) stated,

"The expertise base which supports the U. S. food and agricultural system is seriously eroded and must be revitalized. Strategically, our nation's security is clearly dependent upon the requisite expertise to conduct the science and business of producing and distributing our future food while carefully managing our natural resources" (p. 3).

Agriculture and careers in agriculture have in recent years suffered from a negative image. California high

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reer paths of deferring entry into farming, entering farming on a part-time basis, and entering farming full-time upon graduation, steadily lower consistency rates prevail. Part of this effect undoubtedly is a methodological artifact of the more general versus the more specific career alternatives used in the analysis. But this effect also seems to be based upon the perception by young adults that there exists a changing opportunity structure in which fewer and fewer persons will be able to fulfill their ideal of entering production agriculture.

These findings should be of use to university instructors, advisors, and placement personnel in assessing the demand curves for a diversity of agricultural career paths. The findings should also highlight the fact that, for certain of these paths, there is a disparity between the careers that students aspire to and those they realistically feel that they can attain, given their perceptions of current structural conditions in the agricultural industry. Although this disparity may not

school students, in a study conducted by the Mallory and Sommer (1986), "were unaware of the range of opportunities in agricultural careers. They equate agriculture with farming alone, or in some cases do not even know the meaning of the word".

Orthel, Sorensen, Lierman and Riesenber (1989) reported Idaho high school students had:

... a very inadequate perception of what constitutes the industry of agriculture. The students perceive agriculture as farming and ranching only. Little evidence exists to suggest the students have factual information on which to base their perceptions. ... a pervasively negative opinion of pursuing a career in agriculture. ... factors identified to be influencing students' opinions deal almost exclusively with production agriculture. (p. 154)

Many students make career decisions prior to their junior year. Juniors and seniors in high school listed a stable career with a secure future as their top priority in choosing their career path. Their second highest priority was to make a large income. Making a contribution to society and being their own boss was their lowest priority. When asked about careers in agriculture the students felt that a career in agriculture rated highest in making a contribution to society and lowest in providing a secure and stable future. They did not feel agricultural careers would afford them a large income. (American College Testing Program, 1989)

in itself be too surprising, it underscores the potential for frustration and anxiety which many students must feel when examining their future career potential. The findings also provide evidence of the magnitude of the disparity and the types of career alternatives being contemplated by students from farm backgrounds attending a typical land grant university. Such information should be useful in assessing the adequacy of both recruitment and career placement efforts in the nation's colleges of agriculture.

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