

Leadership Development Factors Leading to the Success of Former Florida State FFA Officers

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the factors that influenced the leadership development of former State FFA officers in Florida. The objectives were to (1) Determine the demographic information of State FFA officers from the past 25 years, and to (2) Identify the self-perceived factors contributing the most and least to leadership development. A sample of former state officers from the past 25 years (N=94) were mailed a researcher-developed survey to measure the constructs of *Family, Agricultural Education Program, FFA, School, Self, and Community*. Most of the subjects were from rural/farm areas, continued their education past high school, were currently involved in leadership activities, and still supported the FFA. The agricultural education program and the FFA were the most influential constructs for leadership development. Leadership conferences, FFA contests, goal-setting, and the agricultural teacher were the most influential individual items contributing to leadership development. Recommendations include formal instruction in leadership, continued non-formal leadership education through the FFA, and more urbanization of agricultural education and the FFA.

Introduction

How do we prepare secondary high school students with the leadership skills and personal attributes that business and industry desires for their employees? Some would argue that agricultural education has always prepared leaders (Brannon, Holley, & Key, 1989). Others have found (Ricketts, 1982; Townsend & Carter, 1983; Dormody & SeEVERS, 1994; Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997) that when the “total program” (class/lab, FFA, SAE) of agricultural education is considered, much of the leadership development that occurs within secondary agriculture is a result of their involvement with the FFA, one component of the “total program” of agricultural education. Townsend and Carter (1983) found FFA activity participation had a positive correlation with the leadership of 12th grade agricultural education students in Iowa (pp. 20-25). Similarly, Ricketts (1982) gathered data from 12th grade male students in Tennessee and found that agricultural education students and FFA members from both superior and non-superior chapters possessed significantly more leadership and personal development abilities than students not associated with agricultural education. Additionally, Wingenbach and Kahler (1997) pointed out, “Agricultural students at the secondary level could increase their leadership skills in communications, decision making, getting along with others, learning management of self, understanding self, and working with groups by participating in a combination of youth leadership organizations in school and/or community activities” (p. 19). Lastly, in an attempt to predict Youth Leadership Life Skill Development, Dormody and SeEVERS (1994) found a weak, but positive relationship between participation in the FFA and students’ Youth Leadership Life Skills Development.

Who are leaders? Leaders are those challenge people, inspire shared vision, enable others to act, set a good example, and encourage others to succeed (Kouzes & Posner, 2003). “Leaders are people who think for themselves, communicate their thoughts and feelings, and help others understand and act on their own beliefs; they influence others in an ethical and socially responsible way” (vanLinden & Fertman, 1998, p. 17). Regardless of the definition used, all students have the potential to be leaders, (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; vanLinden & Fertmen, 1998) yet only a small percentage compared to the actual number of students enrolled in agricultural education seem to capitalize on that leadership potential.

Some agricultural education students are seemingly exceptional leaders, while other youth fail to acquire leadership skills when subjected to the same classroom and FFA opportunities. Some agricultural educators agree that the FFA teaches leadership to all students. However, the aforesaid gap between who does and who does not become a leader conflicts with the notion that all agricultural education students all fully developing that leadership potential. Based upon the reasonable assumption that a population of former State FFA officers were exceptional leaders, this study sought to identify the factors contributing to leadership development. Findings may influence the design and quality of leadership programming and curricula in agricultural education.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on vanLinden and Fertman's (1998) conceptualization of youth leadership. They described three stages of youth leadership development, which were *awareness*, *interaction*, and *mastery* that fit into five dimensions: (a) *leadership information*, (b) *leadership attitude*, (c) *communication*, (d) *decision making*, and (e) *stress management*. This model of youth leadership (1) advocates that all adolescents have the potential for leadership, and (2) describes how adults can make a positive impact on adolescents' lives at home, school, the community, and at work.

Building on the framework of vanLinden and Fertman (1998), Ricketts and Rudd (2002) developed a model of youth leadership development. Because so many (Carter & Spotanski, 1989; Cummins, 1995; Tabke, 1999; Taylor, 1998; Thorp, Cummins, & Townsend, 1997) have found that sustained, formal leadership education is such an effective way to teach leadership, Ricketts and Rudd suggested that a formal youth leadership curriculum could further enhance leadership development by supplementing the leadership learning provided by youth leadership organizations such as the FFA. This model was considered in this study because of its belief that leadership can, in fact be taught. If this is true, then the Agricultural Education program should be one of the major factors contributing to the self-reported leadership development of the former State FFA officers.

In a study attempting to describe the leadership prominence of females in the FFA, Ricketts, Osborne, and Rudd (in press) introduced a conceptual model of local FFA leadership development. The conceptual model they presented not only depicted leadership learning as a result of the FFA and formal educational settings, but also as a result of the influence of the family, teachers, agricultural education programs, schools, and community interactions. Individual *self* variables, such as gender, self-esteem, motivation, and even GPA were also included by the researchers as possible factors influencing the development of leadership. To gain a better understanding of what needs to be included in leadership learning materials, this study seeks an answer to the following question: What factors actually contribute to the leadership development of former State FFA officers in Florida?

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine the factors that influenced the leadership development of former Florida State FFA officers. To achieve this purpose the following objectives were established:

1. Determine relevant demographic information of Florida State FFA officers from the past 25 years.
2. Identify the factors contributing the most and least to former Florida State FFA officers' leadership development.

Methods / Procedures

A sample of former State FFA officers from Florida, from the last 25 years, was mailed a researcher-developed instrument using the procedures outlined by Dillman (2000). The population frame (N=94) was obtained from the State Department of Education. The population frame did not include all former State FFA officers, as the location of some of the former officers was not known. The design of the study was both descriptive and *ex post facto*, since the factors that were being identified were pre-existing (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1996). The design was employed to describe the present demographics of the former State FFA officers and to identify the factors that were perceived to be important in the development of leadership during their high school years.

Demographic data were collected with a researcher-developed instrument. Gender, age, year of state officer appointment, size of community, current occupation, highest education level, and current leadership activities were the variables analyzed with the demographic instrument.

Researchers also developed the data-gathering instrument, seeking to identify the self-perceived factors contributing to the leadership development of the former State FFA officers. The instrument was based on the conceptual model of local FFA leadership development (Ricketts, Osborne, & Rudd, in press). In order to determine the self-perceived factors that influenced the leadership development of the former Florida State FFA officers, a seven-point, Likert-type scale (1 = Not Influential, 7 = Very Influential) was used. The instrument included 53 items comprising six constructs of influence. The Family construct was consisted of 7 items, as was the Agricultural Education Program and the FFA constructs. The School construct was consisted of 8 items, the Community construct a weak 3 items, and the Self construct contained 21 items.

A panel of experts determined the face and content validity of the instrument. Subsequently, the Agriscience Teacher variable was combined with the Agricultural Education Program variable. Instrument reliability was assessed using a measure of internal consistency and was calculated on each of the influence constructs of the questionnaire. Item analysis for each of the construct scales and the entire instrument were also conducted. The total Cronbach's alpha for the entire instrument was 0.88. The construct subscale reliabilities ranged from 0.73 to 0.91.

Questionnaire packets were mailed to participants with a follow-up postcard mailed approximately three weeks later. A replacement questionnaire was mailed to non-respondents approximately five weeks after the first mailing, followed by a reminder postcard, which was mailed approximately seven weeks after the first mailing. A total of 52 respondents completed the questionnaire for a response rate of 55.3%. Non-response error was addressed by comparing early to late respondents (Miller & Smith, 1983) using t-test procedures. No statistical difference was found between early and late respondents for any of the constructs.

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, analysis of variance, and t-test procedures using SPSS. Cohen's *d* and omega squared (ω^2) were used to identify main effects, followed by post hoc analyses using Bonferroni multiple comparisons to pinpoint specific differences.

Results / Findings

Objective 1. Demographics of State FFA officers for the last 25 years

Former State FFA officers from 1975 to 2000 responded to the questionnaire. Sixty-three percent of the respondents were State FFA officers between 1990 and 2000. Males represented 61.5% of the sample and females represented 38.5%. The average age of the participants was 29. Forty-five percent of the sample reported that they held jobs in the field of agriculture. Nearly 37% of the former State FFA officers were involved in some type of management position or entrepreneurship. Ten percent were in education, 20.4% were still classified as students, and almost 7% were in the Law profession. The majority (48.1%) of students were from rural (pop. < 2500), farm areas. Another 11.5% were from rural, non-farm areas, while suburban (pop. 2500-24,999), medium urban (pop. 25,000-100,000), and large urban (pop. over 100,000) were represented by 15.4%, 17.3%, and 7.7%, respectively. Over 65% of the subjects reported they were currently involved in some form of leadership activity and over 85% still support the FFA. Additionally, 90.4% of the former State FFA officers completed or are completing some form of post-secondary education.

Objective 2. Factors contributing the most and the least to leadership development

Descriptive results of each of the constructs revealed that former State FFA officers reported that the agriculture program and the FFA contributed the most to their leadership development, followed by the Community, the Self variables, the Family, and lastly, the School (Table 1).

For a more specific description of the factors that former State FFA officers perceived as contributing to their leadership development, descriptive statistics on individual items were also examined. Table 2 details the individual items that contributed to their leadership in descending level of importance. Notice the item "Leadership conferences I attended in the FFA" was ranked as the most important variable contributing to leadership development. Setting goals, encouragement from the teacher, and participation in FFA contests complete the top four ranked items.

Table 1.

Summated Means for the Variables Influencing Leadership Development.

	<i>N</i>	M	SD
Agricultural Education Program	52	40.61	7.17
FFA	52	40.18	5.61
Community	52	34.95	3.84
Self	52	34.67	13.86
Family	52	32.90	8.19
School	52	31.63	7.83

Table 2.

Individual Items Contributing to Leadership Development.

<i>Items</i>	<i>n</i>	M	SD
Leadership conferences I attended in the FFA	51	6.51	0.81
The high goals that I set for myself	51	6.26	0.89
Encouragement from my teacher	51	6.20	1.30
My positive participation in FFA contests	52	6.00	0.91
The high quality of my agriculture teacher	52	5.98	1.20
The support of my family	52	5.98	1.46
My personal desire to lead	52	5.94	1.09
The career plans that I set for myself	51	5.90	1.33
High teacher expectations	52	5.85	1.23
My own positive self-concept	51	5.82	1.18
Encouragement from my family	37	5.81	1.66
The high quality of my communication skills	51	5.80	1.13
My personality	52	5.79	0.98
The quality of my high school agricultural education program.	52	5.77	1.13
My personal need for achievement	42	5.62	1.29
My individual desire to be in charge	52	5.54	1.45
My knowledge of the FFA	52	5.48	1.23
Peers or friends in the FFA	52	5.42	1.27
My own knowledge about leadership	51	5.41	1.22
Other friends who were leaders	52	5.27	1.47
My leadership in out of school activities	52	5.23	1.48
The high quality of my FFA chapter	52	5.17	1.45
High family expectations	52	5.08	1.71
Length of time in the FFA	52	5.06	1.78
The high quality of my Agricultural Education program	52	5.02	1.54
The awards that were available through the FFA	52	5.00	1.34
My family's positive views towards leadership	52	4.92	1.55
Family role models	52	4.89	1.56

<i>Items</i>	<i>n</i>	M	SD
My academic success	52	4.87	1.27
Participation in other school activities	52	4.85	1.38
My high need for affiliation or to be around others	52	4.77	1.49
Leadership taught outside of the ag class/FFA setting	51	4.65	1.76
The community support of our Ag program	52	4.64	1.76
Community support of our FFA chapter	52	4.64	1.66
High school administrator support	52	4.58	1.95
The positive attitude my high school had towards leadership.	51	4.53	1.52
Simply being an FFA member	52	4.53	1.59
Positive experiences in other school activities	52	4.50	1.55
My positive involvement in the church or synagogue	51	4.49	2.14
The high quality of other teachers besides my ag teacher	52	4.46	1.67
Peers or friends in my school	52	4.33	1.64
My need for recognition	51	4.20	1.77
The high quality of other school organizations besides FFA	52	3.75	1.51
My family's involvement with the school	52	3.62	1.83
Leadership conferences I attended in other school activities	51	3.59	1.85
My high school part-time job	52	3.06	1.93
A positive experience in athletics	52	2.75	1.85
My positive involvement in 4-H activities	50	2.62	2.21
How far I lived from school	52	2.39	1.75
A positive experience in band	50	1.34	0.82

To provide additional probable explanations for the leadership development of all of the Florida FFA officers over the years, ANOVA procedures were used to further examine relationships between the factors, controlling for the demographic variables: age, type of job, level of FFA support, level of current leadership activity, rural/urban and farm/non-farm area, and level of education. T-tests were used to identify relationships for gender and whether or not the former officers selected a career in agriculture. With the alpha level set at 0.05 there was no significant difference between the factors when controlling for age, gender, type of job, current level of FFA support, and level of current leadership activity.

When controlling for *area*, the ANOVA procedures revealed significant main effects between groups for the family ($F = 3.54$, $df = 4/45$, $p < 0.05$, $\omega^2 = 0.17$), self ($F = 2.83$, $df = 4/45$, $p < 0.05$, $\omega^2 = 0.13$), and community ($F = 2.80$, $df = 4/45$, $p < 0.05$, $\omega^2 = 0.13$) factors. Each of the aforementioned effect sizes was either large or moderately large using Keppel's (1991) explanation of main effects. To assess pairwise differences within each factor, post hoc Bonferroni multiple comparisons using an alpha of 0.05 were conducted as a follow-up procedure. Former State FFA officers from rural/farm (pop. < 2,500) areas ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 0.79$) had stronger feelings than those from large urban (pop. > 100,000) areas ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.75$) that family influenced their leadership ability. Those from rural/farm areas ($M =$

5.075, $SD = 0.59$) had stronger feelings about the influence of the self variables than those from large urban areas ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.96$). Additionally, former State FFA officers from rural/farm areas ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 0.96$) believed the community was more influential on their leadership development than did former State FFA officers from large urban areas ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.85$).

Level of education had a significant and large main effect on the self construct, $F = 4.29$, $df = 4/47$, $p < 0.05$, $\omega^2 = 0.15$. Post hoc analyses indicated that those with a graduate degree ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 0.58$) stronger feelings that the self variables influenced their leadership development more than those who received a degree from a 4-year university ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 0.59$).

Lastly, those former State FFA officers who did not have a job related to agriculture ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 0.95$) reported that their agricultural education program had a significantly greater influence on their leadership development than those who did have a job related to agriculture ($M = 5.94$, $SD = 0.66$), $t(38) = 2.77$, $p < 0.05$, $d = 1.08$). The effect size of this finding is well into the large range (Cohen, 1977).

Conclusions and Implications

The subjects appeared to be a very homogenous group for a sample that spanned 25 years. They were predominately male and nearly half of them held careers related to agriculture. The types of careers they are currently involved in were very diverse ranging from entrepreneurs to lawyers to students. The majority of the participants were from rural/farm backgrounds and the smallest portion of participants was from large urban areas, which may be indicative of the lack of representation agricultural education and the FFA has in urbanized areas. Most of the subjects were currently involved in some type of leadership activity and an even greater number still support the FFA. Over 90% of former Florida State FFA officers have continued their education past the high school level.

The agricultural education program was the most influential self-reported construct for development of the subjects' leadership ability. This construct included such variables as the affect of the agricultural teachers, the quality of the Agriscience program, and the leadership development opportunities offered through the program. This extent of the influence could lead one to conclude that the agricultural education program is a venue for teaching leadership. This conclusion may support the development and implementation of formal leadership development curricula in Agricultural Education programs.

The FFA construct was the second most influential factor. Similar to the findings of many studies on the FFA (Brick, 1998; Ricketts, 1982; Townsend & Carter, 1983; Wingenbach, 1995), it was clear that the former State FFA officers had stronger feelings that the FFA had an influence on their leadership development. This construct included items pertaining to knowledge of the FFA, participation in career development events, and simply being a member. The individual item that most influenced the leadership development of former State FFA officers was the item, "Leadership conferences I attended in the FFA."

According to the former State FFA officers in this study, it seems that the non-formal leadership educational tool of the FFA is still a strong force in the leadership development of agricultural education students.

The community and self factors were somewhat influential, followed by the family variable, but the least influential construct was the school itself. The school construct measured the influence of the reputation of the FFA in the school, non-agricultural student peer influences, school climate, and the overall quality of non-FFA student organizations had on the former State FFA officers.

In addition to the FFA leadership conferences, personal goal setting, the teacher, participation in FFA contests, and family support represented the other most influential individual items. Conversely, a positive experience in band, distance from school, positive involvement in 4-H activities, athletics, and a part-time job represented the lowest rated individual items. The low ranking could be a result of no experience or involvement with each of these activities, due to no interest, or simply a lack of time.

Despite the age, type of job, level of FFA support, or level of leadership activity, the respondents were quite consistent in their responses across constructs. The major differences in responses were in regard to area, level of educational attainment, and whether the subjects were in a job related to agriculture. Rural/farm students not only represented the majority of the sample, they also indicated greater influence from family, their community, and an array of self variables than did students from large urban areas.

Interestingly, former State FFA officers that did not have jobs related to agriculture reported that the agricultural education program had a stronger influence than did individuals with careers in agriculture. This could be due to the effectiveness of agricultural education and the FFA in developing leadership in non-traditional students, but it could also indicate some failures associated with cultivating relationships with our own constituents in the agricultural industry. Finally, the subjects who had gone to graduate school felt more strongly than those who had not, that the *self* variables influenced their leadership development.

Recommendations

1. Because the agricultural education program and the FFA were so influential on the leadership development of former State FFA officers, teachers of agriculture should attempt to affect all students in their classes by formally teaching leadership through appropriately developed leadership development curriculum, and non-formally by continuing to encourage each of their students to participate in the National FFA Organization.
2. Since there was such a proliferation of former State FFA officers in the sample who were from rural/farm backgrounds and so few who were from urbanized areas, agricultural education and the FFA should continue efforts to position itself in urban

areas, for leadership development should be available to all if all are capable of achieving it (van Linden & Fertman, 1998). In the limited areas that agricultural education and the FFA have found urban America, the results have been very effective. The homogeneous nature of the sample is also indicative of need for agricultural education to diversify. Research should be conducted to find out why there are not more urban programs and to investigate how successful urban agricultural education programs were established.

3. Teachers of agriculture should work with and stay in close contact with members of the community and family members of adolescents when developing leadership in youth. Their heavy influence, as indicated in this study should also cause agricultural educators to encourage community leaders and parents to volunteer with the local agricultural education program to help develop leadership in students who do not have the opportunity to develop that leadership at home.
4. As a clinical study, this research is limited in its ability to be generalized to all former State FFA officers. The study should be replicated in other states or even nationally to increase its reliability and its level of generalizability.
5. This study attempted to measure the constructs affecting the emergence of leadership development. Further, more specific studies, which gain a deeper understanding of the constructs, especially the *self* variables should be conducted.

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