

A View from the Top: Perceptions of Student Leaders in the FFA Organization Regarding Key Teacher and Program Characteristics that Impacted Leadership Development

*Marlene F. von Stein
Anna L. Ball
University of Florida*

Abstract

The purpose of this interpretivist case study was to explore and describe the characteristics of agriculture teachers and agricultural education programs that were perceived to have contributed to the leadership development of students in successful positions of FFA leadership. Thirty state-level FFA officers in Illinois participated in reflections, focus group interviews, and individual interviews. In regard to the teacher related characteristics that contributed to leadership development, the participants indicated the themes of teacher care and an authentic learning experience. In regard to the agricultural education program related characteristics that contributed to leadership development, the participants indicated presence of networks as well as involvement in the complete program as major factors. The results of the study raise broader implications for consideration in developing teachers of agriculture as a whole as well as recommendations for further investigation of teacher and program related variables that could be utilized to make broader inferences regarding total leadership development in students.

Introduction/Theoretical Framework

“As the third Millennium approaches, agricultural education will develop and implement programs to achieve a two-part mission....preparing students for career success and creating lifetime awareness of the global agriculture, food, fiber, and natural resources systems.” (National Council for Agricultural Education, 2000, p. 3) Agricultural Education programs at the secondary level strive to fulfill this mission by providing students with classroom and laboratory instruction *about* the food, fiber, and natural resources systems, supervised agricultural experiences *in* food, fiber, natural resources, and other agricultural career settings, and leadership development through the National FFA Organization (Phipps & Osborne, 1988). As such, high school agriculture programs are posited to be models for career education as well as achieving broader intellectual, social, and cultural educational goals for developing students (Newcomb, McCracken, & Warmbrod, 1993), including serving part of the mission of the National FFA Organization for developing premier leadership and personal growth in students (National FFA Organization, 2003).

The framework for this study is based on a model for factors impacting students' overall leadership development (Ricketts, Osborne & Rudd, 2003). The model indicated that program quality, type of program, and gender and age distribution in a total program to greatly impact the emergence of positional leaders in an FFA program. Further, the agricultural teacher was been found to be a major facet influencing the leadership development of FFA members in a program. Teacher characteristics such as gender, background experiences, and number of teachers in a program were found to influence the levels of student leadership development in a program (Ricketts, Osborne & Rudd, 2003). Finally, factors such as family support and encouragement,

school quality, and community support for the local program also served as auxiliary factors that contributed to the overall leadership development in students (Ricketts, Osborne & Rudd, 2003). Thus, if the acquisition of state level leadership positions within the FFA Organization can be assumed to be a central indicator of the overall leadership ability of students, then it would stand to reason that the agriculture teacher as well as key facets of the agricultural program would impact student leaders' paths to success in achieving state level leadership positions. As such, this study sought to investigate the role that the individual teacher and program characteristics played on overall leadership development as perceived by students engaged in the leadership experiences of holding an FFA office.

Yet, while a lofty and highly touted goal of the National FFA Organization at large, of the mission of school based agricultural education in general and anecdotally at the local level in individual agriculture classrooms, the notion of leadership development has been an elusive term in the agricultural education literature. Although there is not one consistent definition of leadership within agricultural education, there are prominent concepts in regard to leadership development that have been used in several studies in the agricultural education leadership literature (Butters & Ball, 2006), and further support current syntheses of literature in the area of factors which are purported to impact leadership abilities of agricultural education students.

Butters and Ball (2006), in a more recent model of leadership in agricultural education, (Figure 1) suggested that at the micro-level factors including the agriculture program, the agricultural teacher, individual characteristics, the school, and the community interact to influence students' macro-level leadership development experiences including involvement in the FFA, serving in leadership roles, leadership training, and leadership education, that then attribute to the total leadership development in a student which includes the development of personal as well as interpersonal skills.

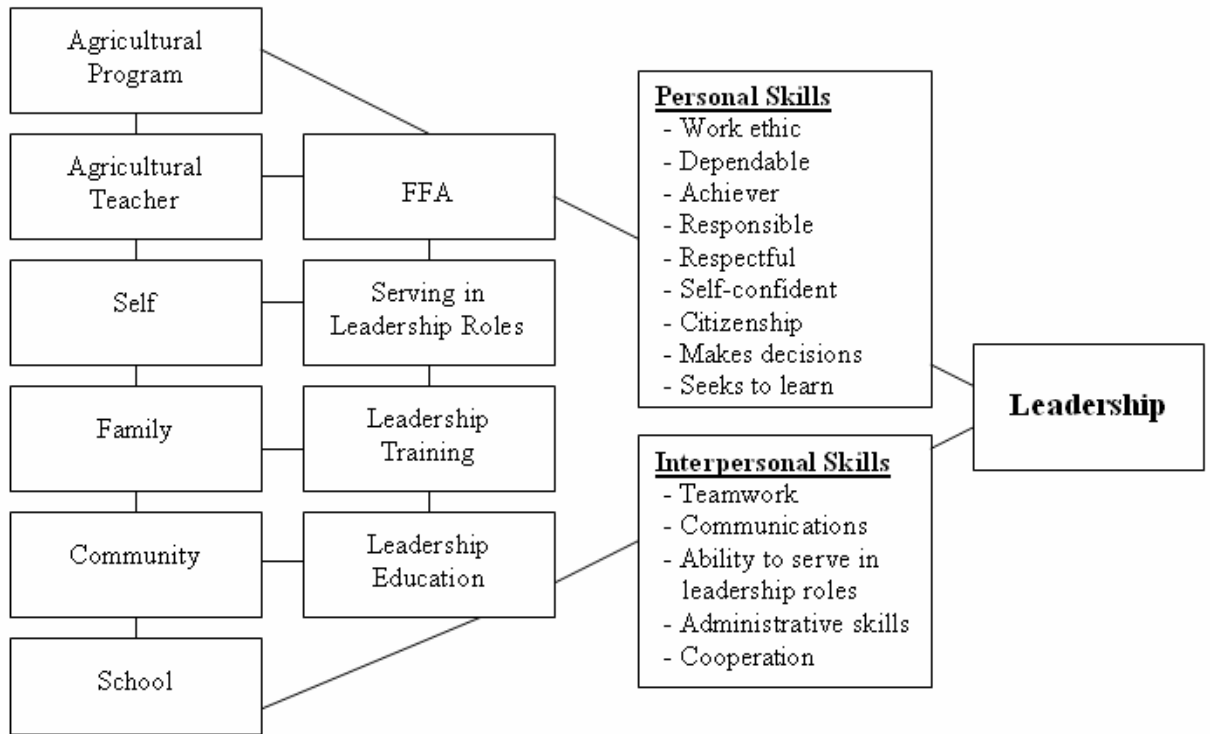


Figure 1. Conceptual model of leadership in agricultural education (Butters & Ball, 2006, p. 9).

As a whole, state-level FFA officers exemplify attainment of leadership skills, in part through engaging in the experiences necessary to 1) become elected as positional leaders by either a nominating committee, a group of their peers, or both; 2) through meeting the minimum requirements of attaining the state FFA degree that serve as the generic requirement to run for a state-level officer position; and 3) by engaging in a year-long leadership experience as a part of the state-level officer role. In addition, many of these state-level leaders in FFA become leaders in the agricultural industry and in their local communities. A study conducted by Ricketts and Rudd (2004) of former state FFA officers in Florida showed that “the agricultural education program was the most influential self-reported construct for development of the [former state FFA officers’] leadership ability.” This included the quality and opportunities of the local program and the teacher of agriculture (Ricketts & Rudd, 2004). Thus, if it stands to reason that the agricultural education program is indeed the most influential factor in leadership development for students, then it is necessary to further investigate the specific characteristics or themes that might delineate secondary agriculture teachers and programs that have the greatest influence on student leadership development. In short, as state FFA officers view their leadership development through a lens that clearly places them at the top of their organization, what agriculture teacher and program characteristics “made the difference” (National FFA Organization, 2003). This study sought to specify the characteristics of agricultural education programs and teachers of agriculture that yield students who have developed their leadership potential at state-level leadership positions.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the characteristics of agriculture teachers and agricultural education programs that were perceived to have contributed to the leadership development of students in successful positions of FFA leadership. To guide the stated purpose of the study the following research questions were explored: a) What qualities of the high school agriculture teacher were perceived by elected leaders in the FFA organization to have made the greatest difference in their development as leaders?; and b) What qualities of the high school agriculture program were perceived by students elected as leaders in the FFA organization to have made the greatest impact on their development as leaders?

Methods and Procedures

This study was a case study of 30 FFA members in positional leadership roles as a part of a total state officer team in Illinois. The participants were part of a purposive sample selected due to the fact that they represented the five members of the state FFA major officer team including the state president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, and reporter. The remaining 25 participants were individuals elected as presidents of the specific regions of the state that comprised the state structure of chapter groupings. In Illinois, chapters are organized regionally in groups of 10-15 chapters per region and an officer team was elected to govern the regional grouping. Therefore, minor state officers were the regional presidents representing each of the 25 regions in the state. All participants were informed of the protocol for the study and agreed to by the pre-approved university research board consent procedures for oral informed consent, as all of the participants were of legal age to provide consent.

Individuals were members of the 2004-2005 state FFA officer team and represented all regions of the state. Eighty percent of the participants identified themselves as being from a farm background, while 17% were from rural-nonfarm backgrounds, and four percent of the participants were from urban backgrounds. The individuals had been enrolled in courses in the FFA program at their chapter level for either three or four years. Of the 30 participants, 18 were females and 12 were males. The purposive sample of participants was chosen for this study based upon the fact that, as elected leaders at that particular level of positional FFA leadership, all participants had received the state FFA degree; had a measure of success in leadership as represented by the positional level; and, as a part of the leadership experience, had engaged with a minimum of 10 chapters in their specific region of the state in leadership events, or in the case of the major state FFA officers, had engaged with FFA chapters and agriculture teachers in leadership events across the state. Thus, participants were posited to have a perspective on agriculture teacher and agriculture program characteristics that were valuable to student success based upon personal experience as well as participant observation from their role as regional and state leaders.

The FFA leaders participated in a one-hour focus group interview and completed a reflective instrument approximately five months into their year-long leadership position. In addition, one-to-one interviews ranging in time from 30 minutes to one hour were conducted with the 30 participants approximately 8 months into their elected leadership experience. The focus group interviews included the following questions: 1) what are the essential qualities of a

good high school agriculture program; 2) what do good programs do that make the biggest difference in the lives of students; 3) what are the essential qualities of a good high school agriculture teacher; 4) what do good teachers do that make the biggest difference in the lives of students. The one-to-one interviews included the following questions: 1) tell your FFA story, describing how you got to where you are now in your leadership position; 2) discuss the major factors that influenced your development as well as the key individuals who influenced you along the way; 3) discuss specifically what, if any, role your high school agriculture teacher played in your leadership development; 4) describe what, if any, types of experiences you had in your high school agriculture program that influenced your leadership development; 5) describe what, if anything, you would have liked for your teacher to have done differently to further your development as a leader; and 6) describe what, if anything, you would change about your high school agriculture program that would have helped you develop more as a leader.

The researchers were informed by an interpretivist epistemology and served as the instruments for the study. All focus group and one-to-one interviews were transcribed and coded for emerging themes and reflective survey results were utilized for triangulation purposes. A team of three researchers coded the transcriptions and conducted peer debriefing sessions to establish initial themes as well as to iterate re-coded and collapsed themes in the second round of coding. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were established through the use of peer debriefing, transcriptions of interviews, direct quotes, triangulation, description of the participants, thick description, process trail, audit trail, and content trail (Donmoyer, 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All interview and reflection questions were constructed from a review of the literature and were evaluated by a panel of experts for credibility. Although the researchers attempted to collect, analyze, and interpret the evidence objectively, there is no certainty that some of the findings were not influenced by the researchers' biases (Fontana & Frey, 2000). The researchers openly acknowledge the following personal information that may or may not have influenced the interpretation of the results. All three of the researchers had prior high school FFA background and positional leadership experience in the FFA at either the state or regional levels. However, none of the researchers had a personal knowledge of the participants interviewed, and a separate individual transcribed the interviews and masked participant, program, and teacher names in order to protect the anonymity of the individuals involved in the study and minimize researcher bias. The findings from this study should not be generalized beyond the sample. This study was limited because the FFA leaders were all positional leaders that comprised the members of the state's total FFA officer team.

Results and Findings

Research question one was to describe the individual teacher characteristics and qualities which state-level leaders in the FFA organization perceived to have the greatest impact on their overall leadership development. Upon coding the data, two individual teacher-related themes emerged, including teacher care and the nature of the learning experience.

Teacher Care

State FFA officers overwhelmingly indicated teacher care as the overarching characteristic that contributed most to their leadership development. Teacher care included

support and encouragement for all students, building personal bridges, and individual development through challenging experiences designed for each unique student.

Overall, students indicated that teachers displayed care through support and encouragement. One student noted, *“My ag teacher has a big influence on me. Just encouraging me to do all that I can.”* Several times students mentioned that having a supportive teacher was key to their development.

Furthermore, teachers supported the ideas and plans of their students and provided encouragement during progress of those plans. However, officers in the study made a clear distinction between support and support with a level of rigor and challenge for the student. One student noted, *“You can’t set a goal to bench press a certain amount of weight and then sit at home and eat potato chips and watch TV and expect yourself to get stronger. [My teacher has] always been, hey you need to do this if you want that goal to happen...”* Teachers were able to see the potential in students and pushed students toward that potential, even if students couldn’t yet see that potential themselves. Teachers continually reminded students of their progress toward goals.

Several officers recounted personal experiences of the time and effort their teacher devoted to getting to know them personally, including their interests and strengths, and then challenging and pushing them to utilize their individual strengths toward the goals they set, as supported by the following quote: *“...if she knew I maybe would be good at something or I liked something, she wouldn’t take no for an answer. She’d keep going back at me and trying to help me develop my strengths and try new things.”*

Teachers invested time in students individually in order to provide encouragement in the right directions as fit the students’ goals and potential. Said one student, *“One thing I really admire my ag teacher for is getting to know the students on a personal level. All the freshmen that are in freshman ag class, he schedules time after school, he visits every one of their houses...”* Students continually recalled the amount of time their teacher had invested in them personally, both getting to know them personally and also challenging them to work toward their unique potential.

While the theme of teacher care translated itself in regard to teacher actions, the state level officers indicated that level of care differed from a friendship or a parental relationship. Many officers noted that a professional respect accompanied the support or mentorship relationship, as noted by the following student, *“I think what separates a bad teacher from a good one, from a great one, is that they can walk a line between having a good rapport with their students but keeping a level of professionalism.”*

Concrete examples of teacher support and care as related to this theme were manifested in total facets of the agricultural education program such as teachers devoting time to assisting students with Career Development Event (CDE) preparation and award applications, informing students of unique opportunities that fit their interests, planning Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) programs, and guiding local chapter activities.

Authentic Learning Experience

The second teacher-related theme that emerged in this study was the nature of the learning experience. Officers described authentic learning experiences that increased their knowledge, skill, and potential as leaders, including classroom-related activities. However, learning experiences were not limited to only classroom instruction, but extended to the activities of the local chapter, career experiences through FFA and SAE programs, and individual leadership roles.

Students described the learning experience in classroom instruction specifically as hands-on/applicable learning activities; a structured, disciplined environment where students could still enjoy themselves; and consisting of student-driven work. When discussing hands-on learning that was applicable to their careers and lives, officers often compared their agriculture courses to other courses in their schedule. They noted the value of learning by doing as indicated by one student who said, *“It was just so much different than the other classes, you weren’t just being lectured to, you didn’t just read out of the book or sit at your desks all the time.”* Furthermore, another student indicated the quality learning experience as it contributed to their development as, *“...whenever we did hands-on, or even in the shop or anything outside hands-on, all the time that’s when people learn. It’s learn by doing, simple as that.”*

This concept also carried over to the student’s involvement in FFA. Students appreciated the hands-on applications provided by CDE’s, as well as how well the teacher utilized this opportunity for students to learn. Shared one student, *“Hands-on learning, a prime example is like, right now biotechnology...you read the text and then you’ll do an activity to explain what you’re doing. So then when you go to do a crops judging competition...you understand why something is done that way...you don’t teach to the competition, but you teach why things are like that.”*

Another student tells how the hands-on learning approach was achieved through FFA activities their teacher facilitated. *“And getting to go to farms and doing chapter exchanges and things like that. You know, going on field trips, being with other students and being with other FFA members and seeing their part of their experiences with agriculture versus yours...”*

Not all students indicated positive learning experiences as factors that influenced their development. Through a description of facets of the learning experience that many students *didn’t* like, the officers expressed a desire for a hands-on, more laboratory approach to learning as contributing to their overall leadership development that could be interpreted as fun, yet structured, rigorous, and with adequate discipline. One student noted, *“I guess [I’d like] more discipline in the classroom because my [high school agriculture] class right now, we hardly get anything done because he has a hard time controlling the class.”* While students desired some freedom in their work environment, they also wanted the teacher to provide appropriate structure and discipline in order to move the class forward.

Finally, the most widely mentioned, factor of the learning experience that contributed to overall development in leadership as perceived by the participants in this study was that of student-driven work and learning. In other words, participants indicated that the teacher

supported and challenged the student, but allowed the student to learn and grow by doing the work and/or activity through their own effort. One student noted, *“...in order to become a leader and better myself, I should learn to do that on my own. And that scared me, but that’s helped me too.”* Students recognized that their growth came by their own effort. Teachers facilitated an environment where students were provided the resources necessary from the teacher and classroom, but were challenged to do the work themselves.

Research question two was to describe the agricultural education program characteristics that contributed to the leadership development of students, as perceived by students holding state-level FFA offices. Two themes emerged from the data, including the complete nature of the total program and support networks.

Complete Nature of the Total Program

State FFA officers described in detail the characteristics of their local programs that laid a foundation on which they could individually build their unique personal experiences. Officers believed that a complete program is necessary to grow the potential of its students. Primarily, officers commented on the diversity of coursework offered, students enrolled in the program, and experiences available to them. Officers stated that offering a variety of classes and subject matter strengthened their program and also exposed them to the broad range of the agricultural industry. One student noted, *“As far as my ag curriculum and my school, I got to learn about every ag subject. And they took it subject by subject...so I had the background in every area.”* Another student had this to say about the coursework experiences in the program,

“Well, like in particular in the classroom, all of my ag teachers, they really break concepts down for you and they take you into every sector of agriculture. And they show you that there are some things in agriculture that you can use in life...it’s not just you know, ok, I’m learning about crop science and I’m not going into crop science, I want nothing to do with it. And they take something like that, like students especially in my area that have no appreciation for agriculture, no concept of what it is, and they actually take you inside of how significant it is, they show us the importance. And I will always have a passion for agriculture because of my experiences inside the classroom.”

In addition, officers appreciated interacting with a diverse group of peers in their local program as contributing to their overall leadership development as noted by one student,

“I think our program, in general, kind of just reaches out to certain people, and I think if it was more based where like anyone could do it. Where a lot of our classes you kind of need to be like a farmer or be a boy. If it could be like more where there isn’t a traditional or a stereotypical student for that class. I think they would be something that would help the program out, to get a whole different slate of people.”

Students expressed being able to feel included in their program as a factor in one’s leadership development. As one student stated,

“One of the things I really preach about my program was the inclusion of the members...it didn’t matter if you were blue, green, orange, it didn’t matter what you were, you were going to be fine in ag. You were going to learn the material, you were

going to be included, nobody was going to make fun of you, and I think that's what I really appreciated about my program."

In addition to feeling included in the program with a diverse student group, officers stated having the opportunity for a variety of FFA experiences as well. Students recognized a diverse slate of activities as beneficial to their development so that students can participate in their areas of interest. Said one officer, *"They need to have a variety of activities for each member. I know there are some people that have never...done anything with a CDE, but they love to help with a blood drive. You know, just something for everyone."*

Furthermore, officers stressed the importance of having all three components of the program present as conceptualized by the Venn diagram for the total school-based agricultural education program. Providing for FFA participation and supporting SAE programs intertwined with the classroom instruction created a complete package that students in this study indicated was vital to leadership development. One student noted:

"It's important for the students to take all the concepts that they learn in ag class...and apply those concepts in FFA where they can become a leader...and then do their SAE so that they actually have some kind of career self-learning program. And that, a good program, makes students well-rounded individuals..."

Officers also mentioned that their chapter's participation in the FFA organization above the chapter level helped propel them into a leadership position above the chapter level. They were able to meet students from other chapters and gain a greater awareness of the organization beyond their local program. As one student said, *"Going to conferences and different CDE's and stuff like that was pretty fun; it made the difference."* And another student said, *"I went to a few conferences like leadership camp...and then I was at state convention and that was where it kind of hit me that I kind of wanted to do something in FFA. And through kind of like going to contests and meeting new people I kind of got to know more people and I got more opportunity."*

Finally, officers stated that having up-to-date materials and facilities available in their program accelerated their learning. Having the school and teacher provide current curriculum and adequate resources contributed to students' leadership development by allowing students to both recognize the schools' value of the agriculture program and also the teacher's investment in current agricultural topics. One student stated, *"Probably...to get better equipment because we were kind of crammed in the back corner of the shop... just having better facilities really, maybe some updated curriculum...because we were using, say for instance, the crop judging books that we have are ten and twelve years old..."* Another student commented how newer resources would assist the teacher in providing good curriculum. *"Now he still works great with it, but just the newer technology, newer equipment I think would have been great."*

Support Networks

The final theme central to leadership development as indicated by these participants was the presence of strong support networks. Officers spoke highly of the many support networks beyond their teacher that enabled them to become leaders in the FFA organization, including family, peer, and community.

The first and most widely mentioned support network central to individual leadership development was that of the family. *“My parents have always stood behind me and my ag teachers...”* and *“I would say I had a lot of parental support. They didn’t care what I did but they were behind it.”* Additionally, a large proportion of the officers indicated that they joined FFA because of a parent or older sibling who had belonged to the organization. One student said, *“My parents were both in FFA...my family really pushed me to do better, just in everything.”* Furthermore, the family networks fostered development by encouraging participation. *“Like when I was a sophomore [the section president], I kind of watched her and I kind of learned from her...”* Explained another officer, *“And so I guess [my sister] was one of the main reasons I got involved...but she kind of helped push me along.”*

Students also valued their peer network, as it aided in their development of leadership skills. The programs they were involved in encouraged students working together. As one student recalled, *“...you actually got into groups and you got to do your homework together. Like my senior year in ag business we had debates, so you got the chance to work in a team ... and you worked on gathering information skills, you worked on debating skills...working together, that’s teamwork skills and communication skills.”*

Even more so, officers stated that support and interaction with other students encouraged them to take on leadership positions. Conversations with past state FFA officers and older members combined with local opportunities to assist younger members served as opportunities to build a network of peers. *“...and then I ran for section officer after I spoke to [a past state officer]...and she really just got me motivated...”*

Finally, several students also talked of community support that was vital to the success of their program and, ultimately, of their opportunity for success, as indicated by one officer who said, *“... people in the community who were real supportive and wanted to come in and work with the FFA. I think that’s very important to the success of the program.”* Another student illustrated this point with this quote, *“I’d just say all the opportunities we had. Like, some chapters aren’t allowed to travel as much or have the funds to do things...my chapter, we have an alumni that backs us up and we can always go on trips and have fun. And just that opportunity there and we don’t say no to a lot of things and we take a lot of kids to convention.”*

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

From the findings in this study it was concluded that teachers who created an authentic learning environment that supported individual growth tailored in a rigorous and professional manner to the unique strengths and interests of each student contributed most toward leadership development as described by the participants in this study. While not in opposition to the prior literature reviewed, this conclusion was not indicated in the Ricketts, Osborne, and Rudd (2003) study which labeled teacher gender, number of agriculture instructors, and age of students as contributing most greatly to levels of leadership attained by FFA members in an agriculture program. This finding implies that the individual teacher, whether through selected personal characteristics or through design of a learning environment, can have an impact on student development. It is recommended that the concept of teacher care be investigated through

quantitative research to further codify a very high inference concept to specific low inference variables that impact student leadership development in the most direct and meaningful ways. Further, the finding implies that authentic learning environments, as perceived by the participants in this study, contribute to student's overall leadership success. It is recommended that survey research be conducted to quantify specific elements of the authentic learning environment that students learn the most from in regard to leadership. Furthermore, it is recommended that teacher education programs continue to focus on developing preservice and inservice teachers for enhancing the authentic nature of teaching and learning.

A second conclusion as supported by the findings in this study was that support, particularly through current and former FFA members and family members who were involved in the FFA themselves, was perceived as influencing the development of leadership by state level officers. This finding was supported by previous literature in this area (Ricketts, Osborne, & Rudd 2003). The finding implies, however, that "like" could be supporting "like" specifically with the participants in the context of this study. The study might imply that the individuals who are reaching the highest levels, at least in regard to positional type leadership in the FFA, are those who are born into networks previously supported by the FFA and individuals previously involved in the FFA. In short, one could infer a degree of "leadership inbreeding" as noted from the findings in this study. It is recommended that a quantitative measure with positional leaders across the nation be administered to determine if there are specific patterns and characteristics of positional FFA leaders that might be generalized to the FFA membership at large. Further, it is recommended that the study be conducted with FFA members deemed successful in the organization who didn't hold positional leadership roles to determine if similar patterns emerge.

Finally, it was concluded that the total agricultural education program as indicated by the Venn diagram for school-based agricultural education, including instruction, FFA, and SAE, contributes to leadership development as perceived by the participants in this study. This finding implies that in the current context of education, where critical decisions regarding the relevance of the Venn diagram are challenged, at least through the lenses of the participants in this study, the "three-circle model" of agricultural education is considered valuable. Further research should be conducted to codify the specific areas of classroom instruction, FFA, and SAE that most greatly impact the overall leadership characteristics of agricultural education students.

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