

Deep in the heart of FFA: Leadership activities and member role by demographic

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Introduction

Leadership skills and behaviors of members in youth organizations have been widely examined. Specifically, in agricultural education, leadership activities developed through FFA has been investigated. These studies have examined either the degree to which youth have acquired particular leadership life skills or the level within the organization at which the members have participated in leadership activities. Little attention has been paid to either the conceptual role that the young person plays in the day-to-day functioning of society or the context in which the leadership behaviors are performed. Research has suggested that the most effective leadership develop programs engage young people in meaningful ways as they work as partners with adults in addressing real world situations.

Literature Review

As a premier youth leadership organization, FFA has prepared future leaders for local, state and national activities. In fact, the FFA mission states “The National FFA Organization is dedicated to making a positive difference in the lives of young people by developing their potential for premier leadership, personal growth and career success through agricultural education” (National FFA, 2005).

Research studies have indicated that participation in FFA enhances leadership abilities. Several researchers (Townsend & Carter, 1983; Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997) have found a positive relationship between leadership skills scores and FFA participation. Further, Brannon, Holley & Key (1989) found Vocational Agriculture and the FFA had an impact on the success of many community leaders. These community leaders who had participated in vocational agriculture felt their leadership activities were effective in developing their leadership skills, contributed to their success, and have been of value to their careers regardless of their occupations (Brannon, Holley & Key, 1989). Further, Balschweid and Talbert (2000) concluded that FFA members were more engaged in school and community activities and career preparations than either non-members or typical high school students. Scales and Leffert (1999) concluded that youth organizations provide opportunities for success, a sense of belonging and safety, activities that are challenging, interaction and support from adults, leadership opportunities, and other interactions that contribute to the positive development and resiliency of youth.

FFA member in demographic groups have been examined. Dormody & SeEVERS (1994) found leadership life skills development was not related to self esteem, years in FFA, age, ethnicity, or place in residence. However, female FFA members had higher youth leadership life skills development than male members (Dormody & SeEVERS, 1994). Further, Carter and Spotanski

(1989) stated students who served as an officer, committee chair or have received formal leadership training consistently rated each of the 10 leadership and personal development significantly higher than those students without these leadership experiences. In addition, gender has been examined.

In 2004, the National FFA Organization introduced a national leadership curriculum, LifeKnowledge. This curriculum’s foundation is the 16 Precepts of National FFA Essential Learnings (Figure 1). These 16 Precepts focus around four key areas building on the area of Me, We, Do, and Serve. These precepts were developed by leadership experts, teacher educators, agricultural education teachers and agriculture industry leaders.

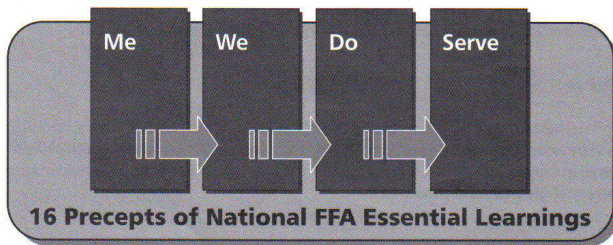


Figure 1. Precepts of the National FFA Essential Learnings

Role of Youth in Youth-Adult Interactions

Lofquist (1989) developed what he termed a “spectrum of attitudes” that adults may hold regarding the role of young people in society. The left side of his continuum (Figure 2.) represents an attitude where young people are viewed as “objects,” being told what to do because the adult “knows what’s best” for the youth. As “recipients,” young people participate in learning experiences that adults see as “being good for them.” However, the real contributions of young people are seen as being deferred until some later date and learning experiences are seen as practice for later life. When youth are viewed as “resources”, actions of young people have present value to the community and there is an attitude of respect focusing on building self-esteem and being productive. The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development (2001) later added a characterization of youth as “partners” to Lofquist’s original continuum. As partners, youth share leadership and decision-making roles with adults.



Figure 2. Lofquist Leadership Theory in Role of Youth in Youth-Adult Interaction.

Context of Leadership Activities

Ayres (1987) identified four key developmental phases through which individuals engaged in a leadership curriculum should progress (Figure 3.) These phases are closely aligned with the 16 Precepts of the National FFA Essential Learnings. First individuals must develop an expanded

knowledge of self, that is, who they are, what they believe, and how they function. Next they move toward mastering skills necessary to work effectively with others. In the next phase, individuals refine their skills working with groups or organizations. The final phase focuses on leadership within the context of communities, systems, and society. As the arena in which leadership is being practiced continues to broaden, individuals must use knowledge and skills learned at previous levels to be effective in the new context.

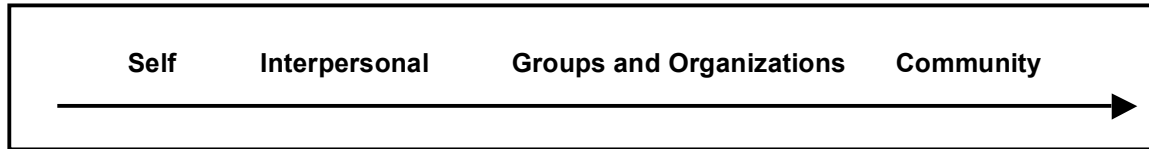


Figure 3. Ayers Leadership Theory in Context of Leadership Activity.

Similarly, Austin (1996) offered a leadership model which focused on developing knowledge and skills first at the individual level, emphasizing that “before we can contribute to a larger effort, it is imperative that we understand ourselves” (p. 118). However, in this model group development included the knowledge and skills related to interpersonal communication and interactions, as well as, the ability to participate in and understand group development, working together to achieve goals, and dealing with conflict. The third level in this model of leadership development focuses on community, recognizing that the ultimate goal of individual and group development is to serve the common good beyond the individual or organization.

The Theoretical Framework of this study is based on the Member Role/Context Leadership Theory created by Peiter, Rennekamp and Nall in 2005, as shown in the conceptual map in Figure 4. Relationship of member role to context of chapter leadership activities is examined.

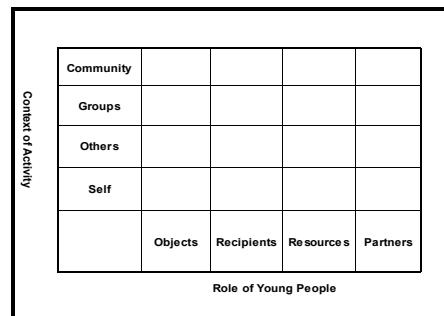


Figure 4. Conceptual Map of Member Role/Context Leadership Theory

Methods

The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of youth in youth-adult interactions and the context of chapter leadership activities of rural FFA members by demographic area (gender, grade level, years of FFA membership, and chapter leadership experience).

Specific objectives of the study include:

- 1) Describe the personal characteristics of rural FFA members.

- 2) Determine the role of rural FFA members in youth-adult interactions for gender, grade level, years of FFA membership, and chapter leadership experience.
- 3) Determine the context of rural FFA members' leadership activities by gender, grade level, years of FFA membership, and chapter leadership experience.

The target population for this descriptive study was rural members of the National FFA Organization. For the purposes of this study, "rural schools" was defined as those serving a geographic region containing no city or town larger than ten thousand residents. Multi-stage cluster sampling technique was implemented to draw a representative sample of active FFA members from across the United States. In the first stage, three states were randomly selected from each of the four National FFA regions for a total of twelve states. In the second stage of the sampling procedure, state FFA Advisors randomly selected four schools, each containing a FFA chapter which serves rural areas.

A sixty-four item researcher developed instrument was created for the purpose of collecting data regarding youth participation in leadership activities. The context of youth activities were identified by developing statements which reflect the potential roles FFA members engage in as they develop leadership skills moving from personal development to interpersonal development to organizational and group development to ultimately engaging in community and societal leadership (Ayers, 1987). Roles of youth in adult-youth relationships through leadership activities were also examined. Questions were developed which reflected the role in which FFA members were engaged through leadership activities which viewed them as objects, recipients, resources, and/or partners (Lofquist, 1989).

Each statement began, "In my FFA Chapter..." and through responses FFA members measured their current state of leadership activities. Responses were measured using a four point Likert-type scale. The points on the scale were: "1" = "Strongly Disagree", "2" = "Disagree", "3" = "Agree", "4" = "Strongly Agree". Content and face validity of the instrument was established using a panel of experts. These experts were in the field of leadership development, current agricultural education teachers serving on the National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE) Board of Directors, Extension staff, agricultural education pre-service teachers, and former FFA members. The instrument was pilot tested with high school FFA members not included in the random sample. Reliability was established using Chronbach's Alpha and was reported for each construct. [Objects ($\alpha = .71$), Recipients ($\alpha = .85$), Resources ($\alpha = .88$), Partners ($\alpha = .86$), Self ($\alpha = .72$), Interpersonal ($\alpha = .88$), Groups ($\alpha = .88$), and Community ($\alpha = .88$)].

Permission was granted by the FFA advisor and school administrator for all FFA members to participate in the study, as approved by the IRB. Using Dillman's (2000) research design method 48 FFA chapter advisors were notified of the opportunity to participate prior to the first mailing. Follow-up contacts were made with non-respondent FFA chapters. Thirty-six FFA chapters agreed to participate in the study, leading to a response rate of 75%. Researchers received 1202 completed survey instruments. Data were analyzed using SPSS 10.0, and no differences between early and late respondents were found. Descriptive statistics of frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were given for each objective.

Findings

Personal characteristics of rural FFA members were examined (Table 1). Over half of the respondents were male (54.86%). High School freshmen represented the largest educational level. Nearly one-third of FFA members were high school freshman (30.93%). Approximately one-fourth of the respondents were sophomores (25.43%) and one-fifth (19.59%) were juniors. Only 16.15% were seniors and the smallest group was middle school FFA members with 7.90% of the respondents. Over 4 out of 10 respondents (42.93%) were first year members of FFA, and 22.37% were second year members. The smallest groups were represented by those who had been members five years (4.15%) and six years (4.49%). Only 23.74% of the respondents reported serving as a chapter officer.

Table 1

Personal Characteristics of Rural FFA Members

	<i>F</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender (<i>n</i>=1163)		
Male	638	54.86
Female	525	45.14
Grade in School (<i>n</i>=1164)		
Middle School	92	7.90
Freshman	360	30.93
Sophomore	296	25.43
Junior	228	19.59
Senior	188	16.15
Years in FFA (<i>n</i>=1158)		
1	474	40.93
2	259	22.37
3	190	16.41
4	135	11.66
5	48	4.15
6	52	4.49
Chapter Officer (<i>n</i>=1171)		
Yes	278	23.74
No	893	76.26

When comparing the role of youth in leadership activities by gender (Table 2), both male and female respondents had the highest agreement related to being treated as partners (Male: M=2.96, Female: M=3.05), followed by resources (Male: M=2.94, Female: M=3.02), recipients (Male: M=2.85, Female: M=2.93) and objects (Male: M=2.86, Female: M=2.89). Overall, the highest agreement was given by female members indicating they were treated by adults as partners (M=3.05). The overall lowest response (M=2.85) came from male members who had the least agreement with statements which indicated they were treated as recipients by adults.

Table 2

Role of Youth in Youth-Adult Interactions by Gender

	Male (n=638)		Female (n=525)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Objects	2.86	.52	2.89	.51
Recipients	2.85	.51	2.93	.49
Resources	2.94	.54	3.02	.53
Partners	2.96	.56	3.05	.53

1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree

When comparing the role of members by grade level (Table 3), FFA members were in agreement that they are more likely to be treated as resources or partners at each grade level, i.e., the highest means for each grade level were related to resources or partners. However, the younger students, Middle School and Freshmen were the most likely to respond they were treated as objects and recipients, i.e., the means for objects and recipients were found among the Freshmen and Middle School respondents to be the highest of all age groups for that role. Freshmen and Junior members were equal sharing the highest agreement in the area of youth as resources (M=2.98). Freshmen FFA members were most likely to indicate they were treated as partners (M=3.03), followed closely by Seniors (M=3.02) and Juniors (M=3.02). Of all age levels, the Freshmen felt most strongly they were treated as partners (M=3.03). The lowest area of agreement was from sophomores who were the least likely to agree they were treated as objects by adults (M=2.81).

Table 3

Role of Youth in Youth-Adult Interactions by Grade Level

	Middle (n=92)		Freshman (n=360)		Sophomore (n=296)		Junior (n=228)		Senior (n=188)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Objects	2.89	.52	2.94	.48	2.81	.49	2.87	.51	2.87	.57
Recipients	2.93	.49	2.92	.47	2.85	.48	2.89	.52	2.88	.55
Resources	2.95	.56	2.99	.49	2.98	.53	2.98	.51	2.97	.60
Partners	2.90	.52	3.03	.52	2.98	.54	3.02	.54	3.02	.60

1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree

Role of youth-adult interactions was compared by years of FFA memberships (Table 4). FFA members with one year of involvement expressed a greater agreement (M=2.92) in being treated as objects from adults. The five and six year members indicated the greatest agreement for the role as a recipient from adult interaction (M=2.94 each). The youth who have been members four, five or six years have the strongest agreement that they are treated as resources, i.e., 4-year member M=3.05, 5-year member M=3.13, and six-year member M=3.03. The highest level of agreement for the role of youth was expressed by members with five years experience (M=3.15) who indicated they were treated as partners.

Table 4

Role of Youth in Youth-Adult Interaction by Years in FFA

	1 (n=474)		2 (n=259)		3 (n=190)		4 (n=135)		5 (n=48)		6 (n=52)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Objects	2.92	.51	2.82	.52	2.85	.53	2.85	.51	2.91	.36	2.90	.54
Recipients	2.93	.50	2.82	.50	2.82	.55	2.92	.45	2.94	.43	2.94	.54
Resources	2.99	.53	2.92	.52	2.94	.57	3.05	.50	3.13	.40	3.03	.50
Partners	3.02	.55	2.94	.55	2.96	.58	3.07	.50	3.15	.42	3.08	.54

1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree

In comparing FFA officers to non-officers for member role in youth-adult interaction (Table 5), non-officers had higher mean scores in all roles; objects (M=2.90), recipients (2.91), resources (M=2.98), and partners (3.00) than those with officer experience. FFA members with leadership experience as officers rated being treated as objects by adults the lowest (M=2.79), yet their agreement increased with each role objects (M=2.79), recipients (M=2.82), resources (M=2.94) and partners (M=2.98). Members who did not have officer leadership experience indicated the strongest agreement in being treated as partners (M=3.00). Likewise, their agreement increased as they move from objects (M=2.90) to recipients (M=2.91) to resources (M=2.98) to partners (M=3.00).

Table 5

Role of Youth by Leadership Experience

	Yes (n=278)		No (n=893)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Objects	2.79	.52	2.90	.51
Recipients	2.82	.51	2.91	.50
Resources	2.94	.56	2.98	.52
Partners	2.98	.58	3.00	.54

1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree

Leadership activities (Table 6) focusing on self-development were identified the most by both male (M=2.98) and female (M=3.08) FFA members. This was followed by interpersonal development (Male: M=2.88, Female: M=2.92), group development (Male: M=2.88, Female: M=2.91) and community development. (Male: M=2.86, Female: M=2.88). In every context of leadership the females had stronger agreement than males that they had activities focusing on leadership development. The strongest area of agreement among all contexts and genders was self for females (M=3.08). The lowest agreement was provided by males for leadership activities involving community (M=2.86).

Table 6

Context of Leadership Activities by Gender

	Male (n=638)		Female (n=525)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Self	2.98	.53	3.08	.50
Interpersonal	2.88	.53	2.97	.52
Groups	2.88	.53	2.93	.51
Community	2.86	.60	2.91	.60

1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree

Leadership activities were also analyzed by grade level (Table 7). Leadership activities focusing on self development were given the highest agreement by Seniors (M=3.09). Followed by Freshmen (M=3.06), Juniors (M=3.02), Sophomores (M=3.00), and Middle School (M=2.87). Likewise community leadership activities were given the lowest agreement by Sophomores (M=2.85). Following closely were Seniors (M=2.86), Juniors (M=2.87), and Freshmen and Sophomores equal (M= 2.92). Of all activity types and grade levels, the highest agreement was given by seniors and self-development (M=3.09). The lowest agreement was given by sophomores in the area of community activities (M=2.85).

Table 7

Context of Leadership Activities Performed by Grade Level

	Middle (n=92)		Freshman (n=360)		Sophomore (n=296)		Junior (n=228)		Senior (n=188)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Self	2.87	.48	3.06	.48	3.00	.52	3.02	.51	3.09	.56
Interpersonal	3.01	.47	2.94	.50	2.89	.50	2.93	.56	2.91	.59
Groups	2.92	.52	2.92	.51	2.88	.52	2.94	.50	2.87	.59
Community	2.92	.64	2.92	.59	2.85	.55	2.87	.61	2.86	.64

1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree

When comparing members' activities for self, (Table 8) those with five years of membership were in highest agreement (M=3.21). Those with six years of membership had the greatest agreement for activities focusing on working with others (M=3.02). Members with five years also ranked those activities developing knowledge and skills working with groups the most (M=2.99). Highest agreement was given by members with five years experience, reporting leadership activities focusing on self-development (M=3.21). Students with three years of FFA membership identified community activities (M=2.77) as the lowest across all years of experience.

Table 8

Context of Leadership Activities Performed by Years in FFA

	Year 1 (n=474)		Year 2 (n=259)		Year 3 (n=190)		Year 4 (n=135)		Year 5 (n=48)		Year 6 (n=52)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Self	3.01	.50	2.96	.55	3.03	.52	3.14	.51	3.21	.36	3.08	.50
Interpersonal	2.95	.51	2.84	.54	2.89	.58	2.97	.52	3.00	.43	3.02	.46
Groups	2.93	.54	2.87	.51	2.87	.55	2.91	.47	2.99	.37	2.92	.60
Community	2.94	.61	2.84	.57	2.77	.65	2.88	.56	2.95	.54	2.96	.48

1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree

Leadership context was compared by member leadership experience, defined by members serving as a chapter officer (Table 9). Members reporting chapter officer experience have higher means with self (M=3.05) than those with no office experience (M=3.02). FFA members with chapter officer experience had lower means in the areas of interpersonal (M=2.88), groups (M=2.83), and community (M=2.76). The highest agreement was given by those with leadership officer experience in the area of self (M=3.05), with the same group identifying the least agreement with activities focusing on community (M=2.76).

Table 9

Context in which Leadership Activities are Performed by Leadership Experience

	Yes (n=278)		No (n=893)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Self	3.05	.55	3.02	.51
Interpersonal	2.88	.56	2.93	.52
Groups	2.83	.53	2.93	.52
Community	2.76	.64	2.92	.58

1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree

Conclusions/Recommendations/Implications

Respondents tended to be white males, high school freshmen with one year in FFA. In addition, members had limited leadership experience, with few who held a chapter office.

When examining the role of members in youth-adult interaction by gender, females were in stronger agreement in all areas than males. Both male and female FFA members were in strongest agreement they were treated as partners by adults. With both male and female FFA members, as they moved up the continuum, from objects to recipients to resources to partners, agreement for each part of the continuum also grew.

With all grade levels of FFA members, as members moved from objects to resources to recipients to partners, so did the level of agreement of their role in youth-adult interactions. Youth with five years as an FFA member indicated the overall highest agreement for the role of partners in the youth-adult interactions. However, FFA members with one year of involvement expressed a greater agreement in being treated as objects from adults than other members with more years of FFA membership. FFA members with officer leadership experience were in less agreement than those members without serving as a chapter officer.

In terms of context of leadership activities, females were in greater agreement than males that these activities targeted the development of self, interpersonal skills, group development and community development. With both male and female FFA members, agreement for the leadership activities decreases as the continuum moves from self to interpersonal to groups and to community.

FFA members with one to six years of experience rated leadership activities focusing on self development as the greatest. As the leadership continuum moves from self to interpersonal to groups and to community, agreement decreases for activities targeted in each area. Members with no leadership experience, as defined by serving as a chapter officer, were generally in greater agreement that their leadership activities helped them develop along the continuum than those who did serve as a chapter officer. With both groups, the greatest agreement was in the area of self, with community activities having the least agreement.

It is recommended that a National FFA Leadership Task Force be formed to examine how demographics impact member role and context of chapter leadership activities. Specifically, this task force will identify activities which focus on each context level (self, interpersonal, groups and community) by gender, grade level, years of membership, and level of experiences. A result of this task force, advisors will be educated in member role and leadership contexts resulting in members to develop leadership through all contexts. This task force should be a collaborative group which is comprised of leadership experts, agricultural education teachers, Agricultural Education teacher educators, and state/national FFA staff. In all demographic areas, as the continuum moves from self to community, agreement decreases.

It is also recommended that additional research investigate the differences between members' gender, number of years of FFA membership, grade level, and leadership experience. Specifically, additional studies focusing on gender should be conducted to determine why female agreement is higher for member role and context of activities than male FFA members.

Replication of this study should be conducted, as LifeKnowledge is infused into the middle school, secondary and collegiate curriculums. This research would provide a basis to see the impact of youth-adult interactions and context of chapter leadership activities prior to and after the introduction of LifeKnowledge for these specific demographic groups.

These respondents should be included as the start of a longitudinal study to determine if demographics of FFA membership changes over time and if perceptions of member role and the context of chapter activities changes with the implementation of LifeKnowledge.

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