

Impact of Vocational Agriculture/FFA on Community Leadership

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Leadership development has long been claimed as a goal and product of the vocational agriculture program. In fact, one of the six objectives of vocational and technical education in agriculture is "to develop the abilities needed to exercise and follow effective leadership in fulfilling occupational, social, and civic responsibilities" (Objectives..., 1976). The Future Farmers of America (FFA) organization, an integral part of the vocational agriculture core of instruction, is used to provide leadership training and realistic leadership experiences for students involved in vocational agriculture.

The success of this leadership development effort in vocational agriculture should be reflected within the community leadership. Evidence of such an impact would include the number of former students recognized as providing leadership within their communities and their perception of past involvement in vocational agriculture. Is vocational agriculture/FFA actually training for leadership? The success of many former students who are now in positions of leadership seem to indicate that it is. Surveys have found an impressive number of former members serving as local, state, and national leaders. These leaders with vocational agriculture/FFA backgrounds include former President Jimmy Carter, senators, representatives, governors, astronauts, broadcasters, magazine editors, leaders in education, and, naturally, many important community and farm organization leaders (Carter, 1977; Lesson in Leadership, 1965; Pritzker, 1982; Staff, 1986; Wilson, 1983) The role of vocational agriculture and FFA in the local community was pointed out by Fred Adams, president of Adams Egg Farms, Inc. -- the world's largest egg producer.

It is a vital part of America's system of public education. Its role in training people for successful experience in agricultural occupations is unparalleled. But equally important is its role in training young people in good citizenship, cooperation, and leadership that makes our communities click. (Nations Top..., 1966)

Although other research studies (Arrington, 1985; Carter & Townsend, 1983; Iverson, 1980) have shown that the leadership trait is enhanced with vocational agriculture/FFA training, there has been very little research conducted to determine the effect of the vocational agriculture/FFA program on people involved in community leadership.

This study was undertaken as part of a western regional vocational agriculture impact research project. Traditionally, vocational agriculture educators have used an employment follow-up to evaluate the effectiveness of their program. However, the employment follow-up does not adequately evaluate the impact of vocational agriculture programs on community leadership. An impact study was needed to evaluate the effect that vocational agriculture programs have on leadership roles in a community.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose was to determine the impact vocational agriculture programs have had on community leadership. In order to better comprehend and accomplish the purpose of this study, the following objectives were formulated:

1. To determine the status of community leaders with regard to age, sex, occupation, educational level, participation in community activities and other demographic data.
2. To determine what factors community leaders consider to have contributed the most to their success.
3. To determine the community leaders' degree of participation in vocational agriculture.
4. To ascertain the community leaders' perceptions regarding the leadership experiences obtained in vocational agriculture.
5. To compare the level of involvement in selected community activities of former vocational agriculture participants and nonparticipants.

Procedures

Selection of Leadership Identification Methodology: In terms of community leadership identification research projects, Freeman (1968), suggests the four types are: "(a) active participation in decision making in leadership; (b) formal authority is leadership (positional); (c) social participation is leadership; and, (d) reputation as identified by informants is leadership (reputational)" (p. 6-7).

Prior research has shown that regardless of the method of identification used, the results will produce basically the same list of leaders (Hawley & Wirt, 1968; Preston, 1969). As a result of the review of literature, it was decided that a combination of leader identification methods would be used. The positional method was used to identify those leaders who were in positions of authority in nine different sectors of each community-- agriculture, business, communications, education, government, industry, professional, religion, and social. These leaders were in turn used as community knowledgeable and asked to identify persons whom they considered to be community leaders. This was done to include those opinion leaders who might operate behind the scenes. The results of this approach were used to develop the list of community leaders included in the study.

Development of the Instrument: The instrument used to collect the data was a revision of the instrument which evolved from the Western Regional Impact Study. The instrument was divided into two parts. Part I contained certain demographic data and Part II, to be completed by only those who had been enrolled in vocational agriculture, consisted of vocational agriculture participation and perceptions of same.

After the instrument was formulated, changes suggested by the Agriculture Education staff of Oklahoma State University were made and a pilot test was conducted in the researcher's home community.

Collection of Data: The sample of leaders included in this study was obtained by identifying the leaders in a stratified random sample of communities. Because of the differences which are normally found between the five vocational agriculture supervisory districts in Oklahoma, and to make the study more meaningful, a stratified sample by district was used. Six communities with schools having vocational agriculture departments; five single teacher and one multi-teacher (approximately the state proportion of single vs. multi-teacher departments) were randomly selected from each district. This resulted in a total of 30 communities being included in the study. Using the selected leadership identification process, which combined the positional and reputational approaches, the leaders of these communities were then identified. Since they were very familiar with the leaders in the randomly selected communities, vocational agriculture instructors were used to provide the initial list of positional leaders. An introductory letter from the Oklahoma Vocational Agriculture Teachers Association stating the purpose, importance, and procedure of this study, was sent to the teachers in the communities selected. They were asked to select the most widely recognized leader in each of the nine identified areas -- agriculture, business, communications, education, government, industry, professional, religion, and civic groups. These areas were selected to obtain a representative cross-section of the community and prevent biasing the study with agriculture leaders. After appropriate follow-up, all 30, or 100% of the vocational agriculture teachers responded. However, some indicated that one or two of the nine areas identified did not pertain to their community. Results of this survey produced the names and addresses of 255 community leaders. These leaders were sent a cover letter describing the project, a questionnaire, and a sheet asking for them to provide a list of not more than ten individuals whom they considered to be the community leaders. After a follow-up postcard and a second mailing, 132 responses were received for a 52% return. After tabulation of their responses, 471 additional community leaders were identified and included in the study. Questionnaires were sent and, after a postcard follow-up, 237 of these individuals returned questionnaires for a 50% return rate. This overall procedure produced a total of 726 community leaders of which 369 responded for an overall response rate of 51%. A random telephone follow-up of 10% of the nonrespondents and a subsequent Chi Square statistical test revealed no significant differences from the previous respondents in demographic data, participation in community groups, or the percentage of vocational agriculture participants.

Analysis of Data: Descriptive statistics were used to analyze specific demographic data. Values were calculated for the appropriate statistic. The perceptions obtained from the community leaders about the factors contributing to their leadership skills and their vocational agriculture/FFA leadership experiences were measured on a 5-point continuous scale. The scale was designed so that the perceptions could be rated on a scale of 1 to 5; 1 signifying no influence, and 5 indicating great influence. In order to compare the level of involvement in community activities of vocational agriculture participants and nonparticipants, all respondents were queried about their participation in community groups during the past two years. Groups identified were: (a) civic, luncheon, and service clubs, (b) chamber of commerce, (c) community affairs organization, (d) school organizations, (e) political organizations, (f) church groups, (g) agricultural groups, and (h) educational groups. Summated scales were constructed to measure the number of organizations and groups to which the community leaders belonged (scope) and their levels of participation (intensity). For each group,

respondents were given, respectively, a score of one if they were a member, a score of two if they were a committee member, and a score of four if they were an officer. These values were then summed to produce a range of odd-numbered score from 0 (no participation) to 1 (a member who served as a committee member and an officer). An overall community leadership score was then calculated by adding the individual group scores. This produced a possible scale of values ranging from 0 to 56. To compare the participants and the non-participants community involvement scores, a t-test with an alpha level of .05 was conducted.

After each of the eight scales was constructed, reliability values were determined by Cronbach's alpha (1.951). This reliability procedure measured the internal consistency of scale items. These reliabilities ranged from .85 to .77.

Results

Objective 1: Demographic Data: The background characteristics of the community leaders identified are reported in Table 1.

Table 1
Background Characteristics of Community Leaders (N = 3691)

Age :		Occupational Status:	
mean	46.5	Business	28%
median	44 years	Agriculture	17%
mode	38 years	Education	14%
Sex :		Professional	10%
male	89%	Government	10%
female	11%	Retired	8%
Ethnic Origin:		Religion	4%
white	98%	Communications	3%
other	2%	Other	2%
Educational Level:		Agriculture Interests:	
<12 years	2%	Yea	43%
12 years	19%	No	57%
Some college	19%		
B.S. or higher	60%		

Objective 2: Factors Contributing to Success of Community Leaders: The leaders were questioned about their perception of how a list of factors had contributed to their success as a community leader. They were asked to rate each factor on a five point continuous scale by checking none, little, some, much, or great. If they were not involved in a particular factor they were instructed to check none. This was done so that overall rating among all community leaders of how much each of the factors had contributed could be determined. The ratings of each of these factors are presented in Table 2. The most often mentioned "other youth organizations" were athletics and church youth groups. The most often "other" factors mentioned were church and job.

Table 2

Respondent's Mean Ratings of Factors Contributing to Their Success as Community Leaders

Factors**	Mean Ratings*		
	VoAg Partic (N = 162)	Non-Partic (N = 209)	Total (N = 369)
Learned from other individuals	3.78	3.18	3.18
High School	3.71	3.36	3.51
College	3.54	3.16	3.33
Self-taught	3.21	3.29	3.28
Professional organizations	3.03	3.13	3.08
Vocational Agriculture/FFA	3.98	1.36	2.51
Other Youth Organizations	2.18	2.04	2.10
4-H Club	2.58	1.68	2.08
Military	2.08	2.00	2.04
Other	1.60	1.52	1.55
Vocational-Technical School	1.72	1.32	1.50

Note. * None = 1; little = 2; some = 3; much = 4; great = 5

** Those not involved in a particular factor checked none.

A focus on vocational agriculture/FFA as a contributing factor to community leader success revealed a mean rating of 3.98 with 63 (17%) leaders indicating that it had a great impact and 58 (16%) indicating that it had much impact. It was interesting to note that 42 (20%) of the leaders who were not themselves enrolled in vo-ag indicated that it had contributed either little, some, much or greatly to their success as a leader. Many of these leaders stated that serving as contest judges, award sponsors, advisory committee members and participating in other activities of the program had been of help to them.

Objective 3: Degree of Participation in Vocational Agriculture: One of the objectives of this study was to determine the number of community leaders who had participated in Vocational Agriculture. One hundred sixty-two (44%) of the community leaders responding indicated that they had been enrolled in vocational agriculture. Upon further scrutiny, it was found that none of the females had been involved. With the females excluded, 49% of the males were enrolled. Further data on the participation of the community leaders is presented in Table 3.

Objective 4: Perceptions Regarding Leadership Experiences Obtained in Vocational Agriculture: The leaders were asked to respond on a five point continuous scale (ranging from none to great) to a series of 11 statements about the leadership experiences obtained in vo-ag/FFA. Results of their perceptions are presented in Table 4. Eight of the statements were rated in the much category range, while the other three were rated in the some category.

Table 3

Respondents' Degree of Participation in Vocational Agriculture/FFA

Participation:		Activities:	
Yes	44%	Judging contests	84%
No	56%	Fairs and shows	82%
Years of Enrollement in VoAg:		Chapter banquet	77%
4 years	10%	Committee work	59%
3 years	12%	Parliamentary Proc.	58%
2 years	9%	State Convention	54%
1 year	8%	Community Service	53%
FFA Membership:		Public Speaking	49%
4 years	67%	Proficiency Awards	43%
3 years	12%	Creed Speaking	38%
2 years	11%	National Convention	19%
1 year	7%	Leadership Camp	12%
> 4 years	3%	BOAC Projects	7%
Highest Degree:		Food for America	3%
Chapter Farmer	47%	Sophomore Motivation Conf	3%
State Farmer	29%	Washington Lead. Conf.	1%
Greenhand	21%		
American Farmer	3%		
Highest Office:			
Chapter Office	71%		
State Office	4%		
No Office	25%		

Table 4

Ratings of Extent to which Vocational Agriculture/FFA Activities Contributed to Participants' Leadership Development (N = 1621)

Leadership Training Experiences in VoAg/FFA:	Mean*	SD
Taught you how to participate in and conduct meetings	3.93	1.02
Rave been of value of your career	3.90	1.17
Helped you in developing leadership skills	3.74	1.05
Prepared you for assuming leadership roles	3.63	1.06
Help you in your present occupation	3.62	1.26
Gave you the opportunity to lead others	3.60	1.13
Helped you become a more effective community leader	3.58	1.04
Influenced you to participate in community activities	3.51	1.07
Influenced your decision to become a leader	3.44	1.17
Involved you in planning club activities	3.40	1.07
Helped you in obtaining a job	3.16	1.40

Note. * None = 1; little = 2; some = 3; much = 4; great = 5.

Objective 5: Comparison of Degree of Involvement in Community Activities of Vocational Agriculture/FFA Participants and Non-Participants: Overall, on the mean summated scale scores presented in Table 5, vocational agriculture participants had a higher degree of involvement in community activities than non-participants. Specifically, vocational agriculture participants were more involved in community affairs organizations, school organizations, church groups, agricultural groups, and educational groups.

Also, their total community activities scores, based on each of the group scores put together, were significantly higher.

Table 5
Mean Scale Scores of Community Involvement

Activity	VoAg Partic. (N = 162)	Non-Partic. (N = 209)	t-value	Prob.
Civic Activities	3.65	3.51	.43	.664
Chamber of Commerce	2.05	2.62	1.94	.053
Community Affairs Org.	2.71	2.13	2.12	.035 *
School Organizations	2.01	0.92	4.19	.0001*
Church Group	3.90	3.10	2.55	.011 *
Political Organizations	1.35	1.12	0.95	.341
Agricultural Groups	2.81	0.64	8.17	.0001*
Educational Groups	2.10	0.14	5.53	.0001*
Total	20.10	14.80	5.85	.0001 *

Note. Member = +1, Committee Member = +2, Officer = +4. Involvement increasing 0-7. *Indicates groups are significantly different at $p < .05$.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Vocational agriculture/WA was found to have had an impact on the success of many community leaders. Almost half of the leaders surveyed were past participants in the program. The typical leaders who were enrolled in vocational agriculture were presently residing in the same community of enrollment, had been enrolled in all four years of the program and had been a member of the FFA for four years. During these years, they had received an advanced degree and had served as a chapter officer. More than likely, they had participated in judging contests, fairs and shows, chapter banquets, committee work, parliamentary procedure, state conventions, and community service activities.

Community leaders surveyed who had participated in vocational agriculture felt that their leadership activities were effective in developing their leadership skills, contributed much to their success, and have been of value in their careers regardless of occupation. Surprisingly, it was found that 20% of those who had not been enrolled in agriculture indicated that, through adult involvement, it had contributed to their success.

Communities are made up of many different groups and organizations. The vocational agriculture/FFA leadership development program contributes notably to these groups and organizations. In this study, vocational agriculture participants were found to have a statistically significantly higher degree of involvement in community activities than non-participants. Specifically, vocational agriculture participants were significantly more involved in community affairs organizations, school organizations, church groups, agricultural groups, and educational groups.

Vocational agriculture educators should continue to publicize the fact that the vocational agriculture/WA program provides benefits to people in many and varied walks of life and is of particular importance in the development of community leadership.

In a critical time of course evaluation and restructuring, care should, and must, be taken to assure that the importance of the leadership development portion of the program is not overlooked. Vocational agriculture instructors should continue to stress and expand the leadership development opportunities within their programs. Significant attention should be given the motivation of students to participate in leadership activities of all types.

Due to the documentation from this study that learning from other individuals is a valuable source of leadership development, vocational agriculture instructors should continue to involve their local community leaders as resource persons, judges, advisory groups, etc.

Critics and evaluators of the vocational agriculture program should continue to look beyond occupational titles and consider additional program benefits such as leadership development. This methodology can serve as an alternative to the traditional student follow-up evaluation.

Due to the increased number of female enrollees, this study should be replicated when enough time has past that the influence of vocational agriculture on female community leaders can be measured. Further research should be conducted to follow-up on this effort and document the impact of vocational agriculture on the individuals, schools, and communities involved.

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