

# FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN RURAL FLORIDA FFA CHAPTERS

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## Abstract

The purpose of this investigation was to explain the factors supporting the emergence of females in leadership roles in rural Florida FFA chapters. Six schools, seventeen female leaders, six agriscience instructors, and nine parents participated in the qualitative portion of the study, and 51 additional students provided quantitative data. The findings suggested that females were more active in career development events, officer positions, and other leadership development activities. The emergent themes devised from the qualitative data indicated that female leaders in local FFA chapters were more willing workers, more achievement oriented, felt a greater need for power, were more mature, had a greater need for affiliation, and were more willing to work outside their comfort zone than male FFA members. In addition, participants believed that female FFA members are more active in FFA activities that are based upon the non-production content areas of today's agriscience curriculum.

## Introduction

More females than ever before are taking on the role of "leader" in agricultural education. National FFA membership currently stands at 457,278 members, of which 35% are female (National FFA Organization, 2002). The National FFA Organization (NFO) reported that females hold 47% of state FFA officer positions, and female members are assuming more leadership positions. The majority of the 2003-2004 National FFA officer team is now female. The 2001-2002 and 2003-2004 State FFA officer teams in Florida included only one male member, and none of the past three state officer teams has had more than 50% male members. According to National FFA statistics, there are currently more male members in FFA than females, but anecdotal evidence suggests that female FFA members are taking a stronger leadership role in the organization (NFO, 2002).

Referring to adolescents in general, Morris (1991) stated, "What was once the bastion of adolescent males appears to have evolved to a preponderance of female students taking over the reins of leadership"

(p. 723). Zielinski (1999) agreed that females have established themselves as a majority presence in student activities as a whole, a trend that also seems to be developing in local FFA chapters.

This study used a variety of data collection and analysis procedures to gain a phenomenological understanding of the emergence of female leaders in the Florida FFA Association. The study also proposed a theoretical representation of the phenomena in hopes of explaining the apparent trend toward predominantly female leadership in the FFA.

## Conceptual / Theoretical Framework

Research on the leadership of female adolescents has been virtually non-existent. However, the research team for this project identified several studies useful in shaping the initial theoretical framework for the study. Seevers and Dormody (1994) developed a measure of Youth Leadership Life Skills and found that gender was a significant predictor of leadership, with females showing more leadership skill than males. Other studies (i.e., Rohs & Anderson,

2001, Zielinski, 1999) concerned with adolescent females in leadership activities, needs of female leaders, characteristics of female leaders, and gender leadership differences, were included in the preliminary theoretical framework for the study.

As depicted in the conceptual model shown in Figure 1, family, FFA, school, self, community, agriscience instructor, and agriscience program were identified as the key variables that may, in theory, explain the emergence of leaders in local FFA chapters.

Numerous subfactors are listed within each of these primary groups. Within this broad conceptual model this study specifically focused on gender and the need for achievement, affiliation, and power as factors that might influence the emergence of leaders. The influence of family, community, school, agricultural education program, the FFA, and the agriscience teacher was also considered.

The qualitative and quantitative aspects of this study were grounded in the motivation theory developed by McClelland (1961).

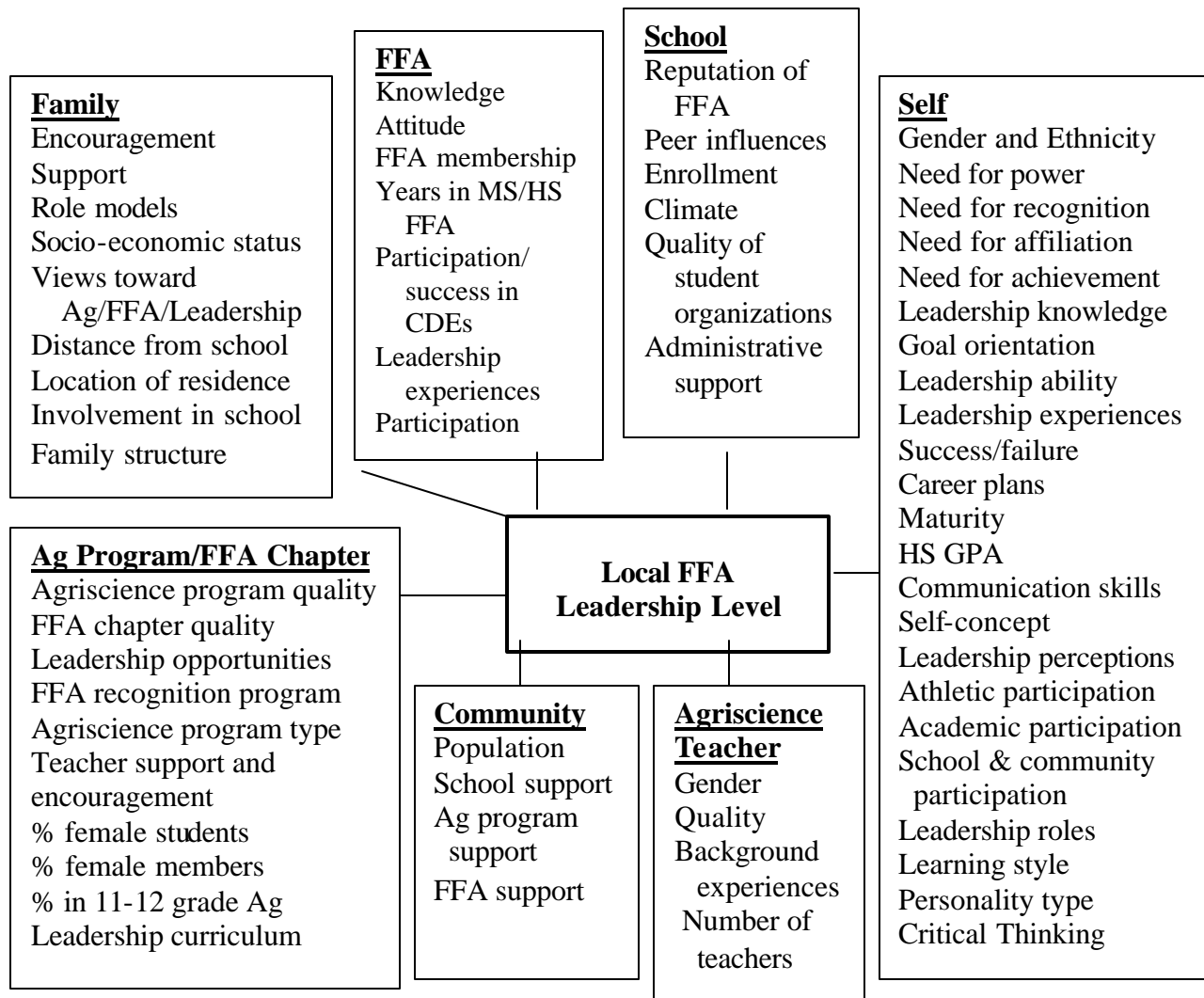


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Factors Affecting the Emergence of Leaders in Local FFA Chapters (Ricketts, Osborne, & Rudd, 2003)

McClelland's research identified achievement, power, and affiliation as the motivational needs that influence the behavior of different individuals. Achievement is portrayed as doing all you can to accomplish a "goal or dream." Affiliation is explained as starting, sustaining, or reinstating a positive relationship with another person. Affiliation is usually associated with the need for friendship, liking or needing to be liked or accepted. Power is described as being in charge of or influencing the "thoughts of a person or a group of individuals" (Fritz, Barbuto, Marx, Etling, & Burrow, 2000, p. 41).

Rohs and Anderson (2001) and Turner and Herren (1997) found that females in agricultural education possessed a greater need for power and affiliation than males. Other studies from outside the agricultural education discipline support these findings. According to Zielinski (1999), adolescent females were concerned with the "welfare of others and the harmony of the group" (p. 65). Moss and Qetler (1995) concluded that females tend to lead with a collaborative, developmental, and relationship-oriented style.

Other studies have examined female youth leadership by evaluating the influence of achievement, sociability, control, and other variables. According to Morris (1991), "The changing nature of gender roles in combination with girls' greater identification with success in school may account for the over-representation of girls among adolescent leaders" (p. 726). Bourgon (1967) attributed the phenomenon or "over-representation" to grades. He found that students who had the most impressive grades were involved in more activities, but other research has shown that, in general, females do better in reading and writing, and males do better in science and math (Bae, Y. & Smith, 1997; Coley, 2001).

Zielinski (1999) discovered that adolescent females were attracted to social activities more than males. One year earlier, Kazcur (1998) found that females emerged as leaders of socially oriented groups regardless of the groups' traditional gender orientation. Ten years earlier in a statewide Illinois study Buser and Humm (1980)

concluded that females have a greater level of participation in organizations of a social nature. These studies contributed to the developing literature in human motivation, which describes the constructs of affiliation, achievement, and power as they pertain to youth leadership (Rohs & Anderson, 2001; Turner & Herren, 1997).

Helgeson (1990) found that women led by relationship building, information sharing, and inclusion of others. Shumacher and Swan (1993) concluded that female students strongly favored a "humanistic" style of leadership. In a study by McKinley, Birkenholz, and Stewart (1992), female students perceived themselves to have greater interpersonal relations skills than males. Females believed they were more flexible, considerate, sensitive, understanding, trustworthy, tactful, respectful, cordial, and empathetic; better listeners; more interested in others, and better able to resolve conflicts and develop positive co-worker relationships.

Bynum (2000) studied females and discovered that they were more of a team player; more nurturing; more willing to mentor; and better at networking, listening, and persistence than males. Woolfolk (1995) and Eagly and Johnson (1990) discovered that females define themselves in relation to others, while males define themselves as separate from others.

### **Purpose/Objectives**

The purpose of this investigation was to explain the predominance of females as leaders in local FFA chapters. More specifically, this study sought a deeper understanding of the emergence of female FFA members as local chapter leaders as perceived by students, parents, and agriscience teachers. The objectives of this study were to:

1. Describe the leadership status of females in rural Florida programs,
2. Explain female leadership prominence or lack thereof as perceived by outstanding female leaders, their parents, and their agriscience teacher; and
3. Determine the motivational needs of

junior and senior male and female high school students in agricultural education programs at selected schools.

### Research Methods and Procedures

The researchers employed qualitative and quantitative methods to understand and explain the leadership predominance of females in local FFA chapters located in rural communities. The epistemology that guided the study was that of constructivism, which claims “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). The theoretical perspective behind the methodology was symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). This perspective “deals directly with issues such as language, communication, interrelationships and community” (Crotty, p. 7). Phenomenological research (Schutz, 1967), another methodology gleaned from constructivism, was used to understand the roles of females in the FFA organization as well as the phenomenon of female leadership predominance. It should also be pointed out that researchers were male teacher educators from the discipline of agricultural education.

### Data Sources

This study’s population consisted of high school students enrolled in agriscience programs in Florida, along with their parents and teachers. The agriscience teachers in six purposively selected rural schools were asked to identify two to three of the most outstanding female leaders in their respective local FFA chapters. Rural schools were selected because the researchers had informally observed a clear pattern of predominant female leadership in these schools. Further, focusing only on rural schools allowed for better control of extraneous variables in the study. A total of 17 outstanding female leaders were nominated and participated in the study. These leaders were also asked to deliver an open-ended questionnaire to one of their parents. Nine of the parents provided data for the study. In addition, the agriscience

teachers at the six selected schools were interviewed, and a sample of 51 junior and senior students enrolled in agriscience classes at these schools completed a questionnaire as a fourth data source. The six schools were purposively selected based on the following criteria:

1. Only one agriscience teacher in the agriscience department;
2. School located in a rural community with a population of less than 2,500;
3. Of the six schools selected three employed a male agriscience teacher and three employed a female agriscience teacher; and
4. The agriscience program and the FFA chapter were recognized as “quality programs” by university and state agricultural education staff members.

### Data Gathering Sources

The qualitative portion of the study utilized interviews, focus groups, and open-ended questionnaires to determine the leadership roles of females in local FFA chapters, explore the predominance of females as local FFA chapter leaders, and more fully explain the female youth leadership phenomenon. Focus groups consisted of groups of two to three outstanding female leaders as identified by their agriscience teachers at each of the six schools. Interviews and focus groups used semi-structured (Shank, 2002) questions in order to acquire richness of data, while staying on task. Teacher interviews were conducted without the students present, and student focus groups were conducted without the presence of the teacher. The interviews and focus groups, which served as the primary data sources, were audiotaped and transcribed. Additional data, such as field notes, reflective journal entries, and letters of support provided by some principals at participating schools were also analyzed. The parents’ questionnaire contained six questions pertaining to their daughter’s leadership activities in the local FFA chapter.

A quantitative segment of the study was added to further explore the phenomenon of predominant female leadership.

Quantitative data collection procedures included a student questionnaire developed by the researchers. The questionnaire included a test developed by Turner (1996) designed to measure the motivational needs of power, affiliation, and achievement. A five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) was used with each response item. Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the internal consistency of the scale. Results suggested that the instrument possessed an acceptable degree of internal reliability for each of the three constructs of achievement ( $\alpha = .74$ ), power ( $\alpha = .86$ ), and affiliation ( $\alpha = .61$ ).

#### *Data Analysis Procedures*

The qualitative data were analyzed by listening to the audiotapes, reading the transcripts, developing codes, combining codes into themes, and denoting the frequency that each theme emerged during the interview and focus group conversations. The conceptual model representing the emergence of local FFA leadership served as a guide to the coding process and negated biases on the part of the research team, but the model did not restrict the emergence of new themes that surfaced through the interviews. In determining the underlying basis for the emergence of female leadership in local FFA chapters, themes were analyzed, confirmed, or disconfirmed by measures of frequency across teachers, parents, and students. The triangulation of data collection methods, use of multiple sources, and involvement of multiple investigators strengthened the quality, trustworthiness, and ultimately the credibility of the data (Glesne, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The quantitative data, which were used to describe the self-perceived motivation levels of junior and senior students in the agriscience programs where the interviews and focus groups were conducted, were analyzed using SPSS for Windows version 10. Frequencies, means, standard deviations, and  $t$ -tests were used to further explore the data. However, lack of randomization in the study limited generalization of the findings to the purposive sample of students that provided data for the study.

## Results

### *Objective One*

Objective one sought to describe the leadership status of females in rural FFA chapters in Florida. Based on the interviews and focus groups, teachers and students clearly felt that their chapters were predominately led by females. Two of the schools had all female officer teams; two of the selected schools had FFA officer teams with a strong majority of females; the officer team at one school was half male and half female; and the officer team at the other school was predominately male. In the school that had a mostly male officer team, the teacher admitted that her stronger leaders were the "young ladies." When asked if the females took a more active role in leadership, she responded:

*Most definitely, they're not afraid. We use the phrase here, 'stepping out of the box,' and the young ladies are not afraid to step out of the box. Some of my young men are... they don't want to step out of the box.*

Studies have found that FFA activities influence youth leadership development (Townsend & Carter, 1983; Ricketts, 1982). When asked whether male or female FFA members tend to participate more in certain career development events (CDEs), student, teacher, and parent participants stated that female FFA members tended to be more active in certain CDEs, especially parliamentary procedure and public speaking, than male members (see Table 1).

Chapter officer leadership and CDEs were not the only areas where females were taking the lead. Teachers and students also indicated that females were more active in Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) Programs, submitting state FFA degree applications, organizing school-wide leadership conferences, and recruiting FFA members. According to one teacher, females in his FFA chapter "are not shy; they are outspoken, they are go-getters, you know. If they decide to do something, they will go out and recruit their own team among our members."

Table 1  
*Gender of FFA Members Predominantly Participating in CDEs by Frequency Mentioned by Study Participants (students, teachers, and parents)*

| CDE                            | Male | Female |
|--------------------------------|------|--------|
| Livestock                      | 4    | 2      |
| Forestry                       | 2    | 1      |
| Tractor Driving                | 6    | 1      |
| Ag. Mechanics                  | 1    | 2      |
| Ag. Business/Sales and Service | 0    | 3      |
| Horticulture                   | 0    | 3      |
| Vegetable                      | 0    | 3      |
| Parliamentary Procedure        | 1    | 9      |
| Public Speaking                | 0    | 8      |
| Dairy/Horse                    | 0    | 2      |

### *Objective 2*

The next objective sought to explain female leadership prominence, or lack thereof, as perceived by outstanding female leaders, their parents, and their agriscience teachers. Table 2 is a summary of the themes and corresponding frequencies of those themes.

After recombining the primary codes, the More Willing Workers theme emerged as the top ranked theme of the participants. (That is, the three female teachers mentioned 16 different times that female FFA members were more willing workers than male FFA members. Likewise, male teachers mentioned this trait on 11 occasions during their interviews, the female FFA leaders made reference to this trait 90 times during their collective interviews, and parents mentioned this trait 16 different times in their open-ended responses on the

written questionnaire, for a total of 133 different times that all participants indicated that female FFA members were more willing workers than male FFA members.) This theme is a result of coded conversations dealing with the drive and desire, responsibility, commitment, dependability, willingness, participation, decisiveness, organization, and initiative of female leaders. The following statement from one of the student participants is representative of the female leaders interviewed:

*Cause I cheer, I play basketball, I do track, I do everything else, but I spend a lot of time in the FFA and I go home and I have tons of homework and I don't go to bed until 2:00, but I choose to do all of this, and if I am going to be in the FFA, I*

*am going to do the best I can do. I guess you have to make sacrifices and the boys aren't willing to make sacrifices.*

The desire of females to be the best in school, FFA activities, and other extracurricular activities was discussed extensively in the interviews. The achievement theme also represents dialogue concerning the goal orientation of female leaders in all aspects of their lives. The determined desire to achieve exhibited by the competitive young leaders was supported by the teacher interviews and the parent surveys.

Extracurricular activities, more specifically sports, were a major topic of discussion with the teachers and the students. Whether during the competitive season or at other times, teacher and student participants noted that sports have taken over the majority of male students' time and reduced their FFA participation. Reasons given for the domineering nature of sports included pressure from parents, pressure from the community, more interest on the part of the male students, more prestige, and the yearlong design of the sports programs. Females played sports, too, but found that the FFA provided more personal recognition for their accomplishments, even if their sports team was very successful. The female FFA leaders interviewed were also active in other school activities, including chorus, journalism, and student government. Family support, especially parental support, was an apparent factor influencing the leadership development of the female leaders. Whether the parents were

encouraging their daughters emotionally or giving them a ride to parliamentary procedure practice, their support helped elevate their daughter's leadership level. Findings suggested that the family factor might also have an adverse effect when parents discourage FFA participation in lieu of other activities.

Female leaders seldom admitted to their use or enjoyment of power, but careful coding of the focus group and interview transcripts indicated that these students were indeed power oriented in leading their respective FFA chapters. (However, results of the quantitative data analysis, reported later in this paper, did not suggest a significant difference in the need for power between male and female FFA members.) Qualitative data suggested that female leaders did not seek power situations, but they were very capable of taking charge when they felt it was necessary. One of the participants explained, "the girls...step up and take charge because we've been taught that... In my opinion I think the guys should just get off their rear end and sit up and take charge just like the rest of us."

Age emerged as a theme, although it was not part of the conceptual model used in the study. Basically, students and teachers both indicated that many of their leaders were newer FFA members and not necessarily upperclassmen. One of the teachers described how he recruited ninth graders for parliamentary procedure and public speaking because "that's where you pull out a little bit more of your leadership..." The gender imbalance did not seem to exist with the ninth and tenth graders. Many of the participants spoke of ninth or tenth grade

Table 2  
*Frequency of Emergent Themes Explaining the Predominance of Female Leaders in Local FFA Chapters*

| Theme                                     | Female Teacher | Male Teacher | Female Students | Parents | Totals | Rank |
|---|----------------|--------------|-----------------|---------|--------|------|
| More willing workers                      | 16             | 11           | 90              | 16      | 133    | 1    |
| More achievement-oriented                 | 20             | 9            | 66              | 12      | 107    | 2    |
| Participation in extracurricular (Sports) | 16             | 19           | 20              | 0       | 55     | 3    |
| Strong family support                     | 8              | 9            | 25              | 12      | 54     | 4    |
| More desire for power                     | 8              | 1            | 21              | 21      | 51     | 5    |
| Age (older)                               | 11             | 8            | 26              | 0       | 45     | 6    |
| Greater need for affiliation              | 8              | 2            | 22              | 1       | 33     | 7    |
| Teacher support                           | 6              | 4            | 12              | 3       | 25     | 8    |
| More eager to go beyond comfort zone      | 15             | 1            | 8               | 0       | 24     | 9    |
| Curriculum                                | 1              | 11           | 8               | 0       | 20     | 10   |

students (males and females) that were active FFA members and potential leaders of the chapter. Teachers articulated accounts of talented young men who suddenly disappeared when they got their first car or chance to play varsity athletics. The majority of the participants believed the answer to increasing the number of males in leadership programs was to start recruiting male members and involving them in leadership activities early in middle school and the early years of high school.

Although discussed less than the other motivational needs, affiliation was a very predominant topic in the dialogue of the participants. Several participants believed males wanted to affiliate with a small, familiar group, while females were much

more open to meeting all types of people. Even though the transcripts and field notes indicated the social nature of the females, parents did not indicate that affiliation was a factor in explaining their daughters' leadership ability.

According to the female leaders and some of the parents, the teacher was a very influential force in the development of leadership, but not necessarily the phenomenon of female leadership predominance. Teacher gender was a variable that the research team hypothesized would influence female leadership in FFA, but this was not confirmed in the interviews. The evidence did not indicate that teachers encouraged females more than males, but teachers did express a tendency to rely on

females more because of their greater willingness to work, participate, and cooperate.

The participants seemed to believe that male students just could not get out of their comfort zone. Males were said to avoid traveling to leadership workshops, competing in CDEs, or attending special FFA-sponsored events (e.g., barn dances). Many participants were frustrated because they felt that the male FFA members simply would not attempt to get involved. A female teacher in the study offered the following explanation:

*A lot of my gentlemen are good 'ole country kids and they are used to things right here in [community]. Getting up and going to school in the mornings and playing football and doing a little bit of FFA things, hunting on the weekends and if you try to say ok let's go Friday and Saturday to [the university leadership workshop] they don't care a thing about leaving [community].*

Some of the teachers felt like the trend toward agriscience instead of production agriculture and the emphasis on technology strengthened the leadership predominance of female FFA leaders. A male teacher who had the most equal representation of male and female leaders of all teachers in the study felt like today's students were being deprived of fundamental, production-oriented types of learning opportunities. He understood the value of agriscience, agribusiness, and getting away from "cows, sows, and plows," but felt like it has gone too far. Students from a different school confirmed his assumptions as they explained males' frustration with today's agriscience classes.

*See they try to teach you in these Ag classes. They try to give you a little bit of knowledge about agriculture and I think these classes are supposed to kind of influence you to get in FFA, but the type of classes that we have are so large you can't go to the fields and do your garden*

*and stuff, and you can't go in the back and weld and do engines in the tractor and stuff, so I think people [males] get so frustrated inside these classes that they can't really get hands-on activities to really want to join.*

### Objective 3

Males and females reported strong and similar self-perceptions of need for achievement, power, and affiliation. Statistically, agricultural education students had the highest need for achievement (males,  $M = 20.28$ ,  $SD = 2.59$ , females,  $M = 19.50$ ,  $SD = 4.21$ ), followed by power (males,  $M = 16.48$ ,  $SD = 4.57$ , females,  $M = 18.77$ ,  $SD = 4.21$ ), followed by affiliation (males,  $M = 16.16$ ,  $SD = 3.83$ , females,  $M = 16.96$ ,  $SD = 2.75$ ). Additionally, t-test results showed no gender differences for achievement,  $t(49) = .79$ ,  $p > .05$ , power,  $t(49) = 1.86$ ,  $p > .05$ , and affiliation,  $t(49) = -.86$ ,  $p > .05$ .

### Conclusions and Discussion

According to participants of this study, females are more predominate in local FFA chapter officer teams and leadership activities than males. Females in rural FFA programs are taking over the reins of leadership, due largely to their strong desire to achieve, coupled with the reluctance of male FFA members to assume local FFA chapter leadership roles. This reluctance to compete against or work with female leaders in planning local FFA chapter events may be a result of males' attempt to "save face" or keep from "losing" to females. Furthermore, males are well represented in agriscience classes and on FFA membership rosters but not at FFA events, programs, and trips that require extra work and time.

The lower relative participation of males is better understood by themes that emerged from the parents, female leaders, and agriscience teachers. The hard work and dependability of the females were apparent to all groups providing qualitative data for the study and also to the research team. This work ethic combined with a strong desire to achieve and be recognized for success may provide a substantial basis

for more predominant female leadership in FFA chapters.

Quantitative data indicated that male and female juniors and seniors enrolled in agriscience courses have similar, high levels of need for achievement, affiliation, and power. Conversely, the qualitative data in the study suggested that local chapter female FFA leaders have a higher need for power (willingness to take charge) than males, even though most of the female leader participants denied the need for power in the dialogical sessions.

Males are able to fulfill their achievement and affiliation needs through extracurricular activities, such as football, baseball, and other sports. The inordinate amount of practice time, the pressure, and “the fame” of participating in sporting events reduce the desire of males to participate in the FFA, particularly as they become upperclassmen. Football programs in many of the schools where the study was conducted provided school time for athletes to practice and lift weights, making it an intra-curricular activity. In contrast, females view the FFA as a viable source for their power and achievement needs, even though they are also active and very successful in sports and other school activities.

Male and female agriscience teachers in this study provided equal levels of encouragement to their male and female students to become involved in FFA leadership activities. Supportive parents are very important in allowing females to become leaders in their local FFA chapters. Also, curriculum changes in recent years (more agriscience and less instruction in production agriculture) have led to greater involvement of females in FFA leadership activities. Many male students seem to remain in their comfort zone of familiar friends, activities, and places, whereas female FFA members are more comfortable in diverse settings and more enthusiastically embrace opportunities to travel and be involved in new activities and experiences. In addition, female FFA leaders enjoy planning programs and activities much more than their male counterparts. Male students may be more secure with a small number of close friends, while female leaders may be

more eager to meet new people and have new experiences.

### **Recommendations**

Agriscience teachers need to involve male and female agriscience students in FFA leadership activities in the middle school and early high school years. They should plan and implement strategies for better retaining students in courses and engaging students in FFA activities as sports, work, and other factors begin competing for their time and interest.

Using the results of this study and related studies, a set of strategies should be developed that help agriscience teachers: (1) become more aware of the underlying factors that influence imbalanced gender leadership in local FFA chapters; (2) achieve more balanced gender participation in their local FFA chapters, especially when females have become clearly established in chapter leadership positions; (3) identify positive ways to capitalize upon the strong desire of female FFA members to lead others, while also developing a desire and capacity for leadership in all FFA members; and (4) develop approaches that lead to equal levels of participation of males and females in all FFA CDEs, regardless of the technical nature of the event (e.g., public speaking, livestock judging, etc.).

The results of the study spawned a number of ideas for further research that could lead to a better understanding of the predominance of female leaders in local FFA chapters. First of all, a qualitative investigation of the perceptions of males in local FFA chapters toward the predominance of females in the FFA is warranted. Similar studies should also be conducted in suburban and urban settings. Additionally, research regarding the factors affecting the retention of male students in high school agriscience courses and their continued engagement in local FFA chapter activities is also needed. Lastly, numerous studies are needed, which investigate the influence of other variables in the conceptual model (Ricketts, Osborne, & Rudd, 2003) that may, in theory, impact the emergence of leaders in local FFA chapters.

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