

NATIONAL FFA OFFICER CANDIDATE PREPARATION: DEVELOPING FUTURE LEADERS FOR SOCIETY

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“Young people are empowered to the extent that they are seen by others as resources...” (Scales & Leffert, 1999, p. 49)

Abstract

Based on a descriptive and exploratory research design, the researchers discovered that several factors were important in the preparation of youth for election to National Office in FFA. Information on National Officer Candidate preparation protocol was obtained from 44 of the 51 states and territories contacted. The objectives were to: identify the postsecondary education enrollment status of National Officer Candidates (NOC); determine the level and type of interview preparation for the NOC selection process; identify how states help NOC prepare for the written exercises and examination component of the selection process; determine how states prepare NOC for communication and public speaking activities; seek trends associated with NOC preparation protocol and election to a national office; and determine how states develop their NOC's professional behavior and presence for the selection process. The results indicate possible preparation in skill and knowledge-based areas that can enhance a candidate's potential for election to national office.

Introduction

As a premier national youth organization, the FFA has been in the vanguard of preparing future leaders for local, state, and national activities. Since 1928, the FFA has “officially” taught, encouraged, and provided application for the leadership development of youth enrolled in secondary agricultural education programs. Numerous opportunities are available to FFA members to develop and enhance their leadership behaviors and skills. Youth can serve as committee members or chairs, participate in individual and/or group career development events, progress through a hierarchy of awards and degrees, and elect to serve as officers. The decision to run for office and, consequently, serve in that capacity provides youth with the opportunity to experience, enhance, and apply numerous leadership behaviors and skills, and cultivate developmental assets.

Theoretical Framework

“Developmental assets are the positive relationships, opportunities, competencies, values, and self perceptions that youth need to succeed” (Scales & Leffert, 1999, p. 1). The tenet of this statement is touted and promoted in the mission statements and/or organizational values of numerous youth organizations. For example, the FFA mission statement is, “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, 2004). Gambone and Arbretton (1997), as found in 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.

Youniss, Yates, and Su (1977) found that youth who were more involved with social institutions were more likely to engage in community service activities and less likely to engage in risky behaviors. Scales and Leffert (1999) noted a beneficial effect of resiliency gained by youth through adult connections and involvement with social institutions. Dubas and Snider (1993) reported that youth organizations contribute to a sense of belonging and development of self-worth, expose youth to “real world” experiences, and provide youth an opportunity to positively interact with adults and build positive relationships with peers and adults. “Ideally, we should assess learning outcomes as they are manifested in ‘real world’ activities. We want our students to succeed in communication activities that are part of their careers and civic lives” (Clark, 2002, p. 401). Consequently, preparation for an FFA officer position is a good example of real world activity with concrete results.

Personal power and self-esteem are two important criteria associated with holding a leadership position in a youth organization. McCollough, Asbridge and Pegg (1994) found that personal power and positive identity assets were associated with adolescent leaders. Scales and Leffert (1999) conceptualized power identity assets that represented how comfortable youth were with being in control of their lives and the degree of optimism that they have about the future. Scales and Leffert divided these assets into four positive-identity assets: personal power, self-esteem, sense of purpose, and a positive view of personal future. A question associated with involvement in youth organizations is, how much power (perceived and actual) do adolescents have within their control? Do adolescent leaders have the opportunity to practice transactional and transformational components of leadership?

Self-esteem is an important positive-identity asset that can be associated with an adolescent’s decision to apply for and consequently secure leadership positions and roles. Self-esteem is related to how an

individual assesses his or her self-concepts (Scales & Leffert, 1999). Youth who decide to serve their leadership organization help fulfill a sense of empowerment “... to the sense that they feel valued, feel others view them as resources, and make contributions to a larger whole to which they belong...” (Scales & Leffert, 1999, p. 51). Zimmerman, Copeland, Shope, and Dielman (1997) noted that young people with consistently self-reported high self-esteem have the ability and skills to cope with stress, are less susceptible to peer pressure, achieve higher grades, and are less likely to engage in at-risk behaviors.

Additionally, the decision to run for an office and/or leadership position in a youth organization can help meet the need to contribute to society and make a difference. “...in adolescence there is a heightened importance for believing one can make a contribution, play a meaningful role and have a place in society where one fits” (Scales & Leffert, 1999, p. 50). McCollough, Asbridge, and Pegg (1994) found that adolescent leaders had a higher internal locus of control and impressive career aspirations.

Opportunities for youth leaders to build on their strengths and develop additional leadership skills and behaviors are available within most youth organizations (e.g., National 4-H, National FFA, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, YMCA, Boys & Girls Clubs, and other school- and community-based youth organizations). These opportunities, which are available from the local to national level, range from workshops, programs, and resources that provide descriptions of the role and responsibilities of officers and/or committee chairs, informational and policy-based programs to motivational and inspirational activities, and leadership conferences and programs. Perhaps more difficult to assess are skills that many hope to develop through instructional practices. One reason for the difficulty is what many may label as “skill,” i.e. skill in public speaking is included in a cluster of skills. The cluster of public speaking skills includes the ability to make the overall structure of the speech obvious, construct well-supported arguments, and speak in a clear and engaging manner

(Clark, 2002, p. 399). Public speaking ability, as well as other skills, is tantamount to a candidate's success in FFA.

Based upon the literature, an individual's decision to compete for leadership positions beyond the local level may be predicated upon a higher internal locus of control, self-esteem, sense of purpose, and positive view of their future. Currently, the National FFA Organization (2004) provides youth leadership opportunities at multiple levels. Youth can hold leadership positions at the chapter, area, state, and national levels. Progression through these levels is a process that recognizes excellence, dedication, commitment, maturity, and the effort of many individuals, including the youth. On a national FFA level, the process of election to office is highly competitive and only one candidate per state can run in a given year. From this pool of highly qualified candidates, only six national officers are elected annually.

The national officer candidate selection process is a six-day process that includes a written examination, a writing assignment, and a series of individual and group interviews (National FFA, 2004). A team of talented FFA members, recommended by the current National FFA officer team, annually comprises the national officer nomination committee. Several adults assist with the training of the nomination committee, coordinate events and scheduling and ensure proper policies, supervise the nomination committee, and ensure that specified procedures are followed. While many youth organizations provide opportunities for leadership positions, national officers often are regarded as exemplars within their organizations.

Purpose/Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine the protocol, preparation activities, and events utilized by states to prepare their National FFA officer candidates (NOC). The objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine the level and type of interview training for the NOC selection process,
2. Identify how states help NOC prepare for the written exercise and the examination component of the selection process,
3. Determine how states prepare NOC for communication and public speaking activities,
4. Determine how states develop NOC's professional behavior and presence for the selection process,
5. Identify trends associated with NOC preparation protocol and election to a national office.

Methods

The research design used for this study was descriptive and exploratory in nature. The target population was purposely determined to consist of state agricultural education supervisors and state FFA executive managers/secretaries/contacts in all 50 states and Puerto Rico. The contact information for the target population was selected from the *Agricultural Education State Leaders Listing* resource available from National FFA (2003b). The survey instrument was developed by the researchers to measure the type and level of preparation used to prepare National FFA officer candidates for the selection process. The instrument was based on guidelines and procedures available in the National FFA officer candidate information resource (National FFA, 2003a). The instrument was reviewed for face and content validity by a panel of experts including a past National FFA officer, two National FFA officer candidates, faculty and graduate students in a department of Agricultural and Extension Education, a state agricultural education supervisor, several members of National FFA staff, and a communication scholar in the field of small group communication and decision making. Since the purpose of the study was to collect descriptive and baseline data, analyses for reliability were not appropriate.

The instrument was mailed to all state FFA executive secretaries/managers and state agricultural education supervisors during the spring of 2003. Following two requests for participation, 44 of the 51 states/territories (86%) responded to the survey. When a response was not available from a state FFA executive secretary, the response of the state agricultural education supervisor/agricultural education leader was used.

Results

Slightly more than one-half (23) of the respondents indicated that their state had sent a NOC to nationals every year for the past five years. Eight individuals indicated their state sent a candidate to run for national office four of the last five years. Only one respondent noted they did not send a NOC to run in the last five years. Slightly less than one-half (20) indicated that they have a NOC training program/system in their state/territory.

The majority of respondents (27) indicated that their NOCs were enrolled in postsecondary education the semester they ran for office, 16 said that postsecondary enrollment was dependent upon the candidate, and only one indicated that their NOC did not enroll in postsecondary education the semester this candidate ran for

office. Of the candidates who enrolled in postsecondary education the fall semester they ran for office, over two-thirds (29) were enrolled as a full-time student. Additional questions about the type of postsecondary coursework indicated that 35 of the NOCs were enrolled in resident/campus based courses and the remaining seven NOCs were enrolled in a combination of distance education and resident/campus based courses. Only six respondents indicated that their NOCs participated in an internship the summer prior to or the fall while they were running for office.

Objective 1. Determine the level and type of interview training for the NOC selection process.

State supervisors and state FFA secretaries/directors provided insight about the level of training (1=no training to 5=extensive training) and type of training provided to NOCs for the interview process. The content areas listed in Table 1 correspond to the divisions and interview rounds used in the NOC interview and selection process (FFA, 2003a). FFA issues ($M=3.74$; $SD=1.11$) was the content area most addressed in training for NOC interviews. Training on group discussion and interaction ($M=3.21$, $SD=1.09$) was the area least intensively covered in training NOCs.

Table 1
Level of Interview Training Provided for NOC (N=44)

Area	N	M	SD
FFA Issues	42	3.74	1.11
CTE ^a Issues	44	3.48	1.73
Involvement/Conducting FFA Activities	42	3.40	1.08
Ag Education Issues	42	3.36	1.27
Ag/Natural Resource Issues	42	3.33	1.16
Personal Skills	42	3.31	1.09
Educational Issues	42	3.26	1.19
Group Discussion/Interaction	42	3.21	1.09

Note. Scale: 1= no training; 5=extensive training

^aCTE = Career and Technical Education

Objective 2. Identify how states help NOC prepare for the written exercise and the examination component of the selection process.

One component in the NOC selection process is a writing activity. Over the past several years, candidates have been asked to respond to various exercises, e.g., thank you letters, requests for information and funding from an organization, electronic email messages, and writing a journal

(National FFA, 2003a). Preparation for this component of the process can be met with knowledge and skill-based activities. The most frequently reported knowledge-based preparation activity was in the area of sentence construction/composition (29.5%) and the most frequently reported skill-based preparation activity (43.2%) was in the area of practicing writing letters, requests for funds, and/or response to questions (Table 2).

Table 2
Knowledge and Skill Based Activities Related to Preparation for the Written Component of NOC Selection Process (N=44)

Knowledge Based	%	Skill Based	%
Construction	29.5	Practice letters, requests for	
Grammatical roles	22.7	funds, response to questions	43.2
Punctuation	20.5	Time management	36.4
Spelling	20.5	Responding to electronic messages	31.8
		Maintaining a daily journal	18.2

NOCs are required to take a written examination as part of the selection process. This examination is comprised of questions that measure the candidate’s knowledge of the FFA, FFA history, agriculture, parliamentary procedure, and related topics. The National FFA (2003a) provides candidates with a breakdown of question categories and content percentage. They are as follows: current FFA events (since July of previous year) no-more than 40% of the test but not less than 25%; FFA history (no

more than 40% of the test but not less than 25%); Agriculture (no more than 25% of the test but not less than 15%); and Parliamentary procedure (no more than 10% of the test but not less than 5%). The most frequently reported knowledge-based activity in preparation for the written examination was FFA history (72.7%) and the most frequently reported skill-based activity in preparation for the written examination was acquiring resources (65.9%) (Table 3).

Table 3
Knowledge and Skill-Based Activities Related to Preparation for the Written Examination of the NOC Selection Process (N=44)

Knowledge Based	%	Skill Based	%
FFA history	72.7	Acquiring resources	65.9
FFA current events	63.6	Organizing information	31.8
Agriculture	63.6	Studying strategies	29.5
Parliamentary procedure	50.0	Prioritizing information	27.3
		Test taking strategies	15.9

Objective 3. Determine how states prepare NOC for communication and public speaking activities.

Another aspect of NOC preparation was measured through a series of indicators that dealt with knowledge acquisition and skill proficiency. These indicators enhance the candidate’s performance in the various

interview rounds in the NOC selection process. As indicated in Table 4, the top two knowledge-based indicators were interviews with food, agricultural, and natural resources specialists (84.1%) and FFA content knowledge (75%). The top two skill-based indicators were impromptu ability (52.3%) and eye contact (50%) (Table 5).

Table 4
Knowledge Based Indicators Provided to NOCs (N=44)

Knowledge Based	%
Interviews with food, agriculture and natural resources specialists	84.1
FFA content knowledge	75.0
Interviews with state department of agriculture staff	72.7
Public school education knowledge	68.2
Site visits to industry	52.3
Use of print/non print media	47.7
Interviews with legislators	43.2
<u>Relevant employment/internships</u>	<u>22.7</u>

Table 5
Skill Based Indicators Provided to NOCs (N=44)

Skill Based	%
Impromptu ability	52.3
Adequate eye contact	50.0
Situational adaptation	50.0
Clear and concise speech	47.7
Relevant gestures	47.7
Use of vocal variety	47.7
Ability to organize thoughts	40.9
Personal vision	40.9
Appropriate language use	40.9
Conversational ability	38.6
Reading your audience	38.6
Task vs. relationship behavior	36.4
Time management	31.8
Creativity	27.3
Memory/retention skills	20.5
Rules governing interaction	15.9
Emergence of group roles	9.1

Objective 4. How states develop NOC's professional behavior and presence for the selection process.

Based on 99 open-ended responses, the survey revealed that many states used speech development workshops and mock or practice interviews (31) to enhance candidates' professional behavior and presence. However, it should be noted that

some responses were influenced by staff availability and available resources. The next highest category mentioned was business and industry visits, state officer training, and providing informational training materials (23). Professional training, state staff/committee guidance visits with education officials, and identifying candidates' needs was the next most

frequently reported category of preparation activities (18). Surprisingly, a less used practice was visits with agriculture officials, past National officers, and past and current state officers (9).

It would appear that practice or mock interviews provided valuable preparation for NOCs. And yet one interesting response was, "The key to winning is driven by personality, interpersonal skills, desire, and the ability to sell yourself." This study indicates that a more formal and systematic approach does indeed help the candidate.

Objective 5. Trends associated with NOC preparation protocol and election to a national office.

Over the past 10 years (1994-2004), 60 individuals from 23 states have held a National FFA office (M.T. Publishing, 2003; National FFA, 2004). States that have had three or more National officers from 1994-2004 were Ohio (8), Texas (6), California (5), Kansas (5), Wyoming (4), Florida (4), Alabama (4), Georgia (3), and Indiana (3) (M.T. Publishing, 2003; National FFA, 2004).

While respondents replied to questions related to the preparation of their national officer candidates when respondent data were sorted by the number of National officers in the past 10 years, some trends were apparent. For example, 57% of the states with four or more National FFA officers (NFOs) elected within the last 10 years reported spending time on writing letters, responding to requests, and providing responses to questions. Only 38% of the states without an NFO during that time period spent time on this last skill area. Almost nine of 10 states (86%) with four or more NFOs spent time on FFA current events and agricultural issues to prepare for the written exam compared to only 58% and 54%, respectively, of the states without a NFO. Slightly more than one-half (57%) of states with four or more National FFA officers in the last 10 years stressed study skill strategies for the written exam component of the process compared to 25% of states without a NFO who reported spending time on this area. Almost three-quarters (71%) of states with four or more NFOs in the last 10 years provided

print/non-print media preparation to their candidates to help them prepare compared to only 42% of those states without an NFO. Another area where some trends emerged was in knowledge of public school agricultural education. Almost nine of 10 states (86%) with four or more NFOs provided candidates with preparation in this area compared to slightly less than two-thirds (63%) of states without an NFO.

From an interview preparation perspective, the five most apparent trends between states with four or more NFOs within the past 10 years and those without an NFO were in the skill-based areas of interview preparation. Almost one-half (43%) of states with four or more NFOs spent time on emergence of group roles compared to only 4.2% of states without an NFO. Over one-half (57%) of states with four or more NFOs spent time on reading your audience compared to 14% of states without a NFO. Spending time on a personal vision (57%), creativity (43%), and memory/retention ability (42%) were reported by states with four or more NFOs compared to states without a NFO (33%), (21%), and (16%), respectively.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings indicate the following aspects of youth participation in the FFA officer training programs. Almost two-thirds of the NOCs were enrolled in postsecondary education at the time of running for national office and because of this there may be an added benefit. Based on the findings, more training and instruction may be needed in the areas of personal vision, creativity, and memory/retention ability. Specifically, preparation in the areas of FFA issues, career and technical education, and involvement in FFA training activities may also prove to be especially useful to the students. The written communication skill-based activities provide opportunities for practice to the student, but if that practice does not provide knowledge regarding the structure and grammatical issues of composition, then the training is less effective.

Likewise, from an oral communication standpoint, students who participate in mock interview opportunities that stress content knowledge but place little or no emphasis on the important aspects of delivery techniques such as eye contact, volume, vocal variety, organization, gestures, etc., may prove to be a disadvantage to the student in the long run.

Finally, there was a trend between practice and knowledge for the successful candidate. The act of writing letters, requesting funds from organizations, keeping personal journals, and responding to hypothetical questions from FFA members all appear to adequately prepare the candidate. Progression through these leadership levels, such as positions at the chapter, area, state, and national level, is a process that recognizes excellence, dedication, and maturity. Furthermore, National FFA officers are regarded as exemplars in their organization. Any training that increases participation in such a worthwhile activity is valuable to the student and the community.

One recommendation to increase the potential for election to National FFA office would entail collaboration with specialists in the field of communication and English composition to provide additional preparation and expertise for students that may be especially helpful in their quest for National office.

For future research, instruction in specific areas may eventually be able to predict the successful candidate for FFA office. However, at the very least, youth participation in this process contributes to overall self-esteem and many positive behaviors for adolescents.

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