

LEADERSHIP SELF-PERCEPTIONS OF WLC PARTICIPANTS

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Abstract

This study addresses the relationship between Washington Leadership Conference (WLC) participants' self-perception of their leadership skills and their chapter size, length of membership, level of involvement, and involvement in an officer position. The accessible study population was 2,086 FFA members who attended the WLC during the summer of 1997. A self-selected sample of 291 FFA members completed the Leadership Skills Inventory (LSI) before the opening session of the conference. Subjects ranged from 15 to 18 years of age, with females representing 56.6% of the respondents. The LSI was developed using FFA defined indicators of personal development characteristics including: communication, decision making, working in groups, leadership, and understanding self. Size of FFA chapter, involvement in activities, and holding an officer position all showed a slight positive correlation with one or more of the WLC participants' self-perceived leadership skills.

Introduction

The FFA is regarded highly for its youth leadership training. The mission of the FFA is to make a positive difference in the lives of students by developing their potential for premier leadership, personal growth, and career success through agricultural education (National FFA Organization, 2001). Many of the core goals of FFA align with the business and industry paradigm of leadership. Melendez (1996) defined leaders as "people of vision, effective communicators, effective decision makers, and intelligent individuals. They respect and value individuals and their dignity; they are committed to service and to obedience to the unenforceable; they have total honesty and integrity; they are kind and they often see themselves as teachers (p.293)." These same characteristics are reflected in the goals of FFA leadership training programs.

Theoretical Framework

FFA Studies

Previous research involving the FFA has focused on identifying leadership characteristics and differences between FFA members and non-FFA members in regional areas and states (Townsend & Carter, 1982; Ricketts & Newcomb, 1984; Stewart, Smith, Ehlert, & Milhalevich, 1985; Scanlon & Burket, 1986; Frazee, 1986; Marshall, 1990; Dormody & Seever, 1994; Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997). These studies support the theory that "all good leaders are learners" (Frigon & Jackson, 1996) and that the FFA organization has a successful leadership program.

Researchers have found that students who have been members of FFA possess more leadership and personal development abilities than do nonmembers (Stewart, et al., 1985). Townsend and Carter (1982) found that leadership traits of youth could be enhanced by participation in FFA activities.

This research indicated that members who were involved in more activities on a local basis and in activities that offered various individual levels of participation had greater perceptions of their leadership skills. The study concluded that FFA organizations should continue to stress individual participation at the local level in order to fulfill their aims and objectives. Townsend (1981) also found that members who attended state and national programs (e.g. Washington Leadership Conference) had a higher self-perception of their leadership skills than members who only participated at local levels.

Ricketts and Newcomb (1984) studied the relationship between leadership and personal development of vocational, as compared to non-vocational, agricultural students. They found that the leadership abilities of FFA members were directly correlated with the activity level of the individual within the chapter. Those students who were more active tended to have higher levels of leadership and personal development ability. They also found that vocational agriculture/FFA members possessed significantly higher leadership and personal development abilities than did non-vocational agriculture students (Ricketts & Newcomb, 1984). The knowledge that leadership education is effective aids in vocational education program planning as well as objective evaluation activities. Additionally, the leadership paradigm used by business and industry focuses heavily on teamwork and communication skills; and, if the FFA is to remain a front-runner in youth leadership training, it is important to determine if FFA members perceive that they possess these skills.

Because of FFA's national perspective, an investigation of member demographics in relationship to members' perceptions of their leadership skills could provide a contemporary picture of the leadership status of FFA members. Understanding member demographics and how these affect perceived leadership ability would help FFA chapters in program planning and leadership development. Stewart, et al. (1985) states, "the most outstanding contribution of vocational agriculture is the leadership

training it provides through an allied student organization (p. 47)." Stewart, et al., (1985) also supported previous research showing that students need to be encouraged to participate in as many activities as possible.

A model developed by Tom Kapostasy, Director of Business and Information Services at National FFA (National FFA Organization, 2001), and used by FFA staff, demonstrated the influence of FFA in agricultural education (Staller, 2001). Participation in FFA activities reinforces the knowledge learned through classroom lessons and supervised agricultural experiences. The idea of integration has also been extended to the Local Program Success (LPS) initiative. LPS emphasizes the total program, instruction, SAE and FFA, to help teachers facilitate programs that meet the needs of students and the community (National FFA Organization, 2001).

Leadership Skill Development

Dormody and Seevers (1994) suggested that leadership skills are explained by three factors: achievement expectancy, participation in FFA activities, and gender. The researchers further indicated that high expectations held by FFA members, combined with a high level of performance expected by others, yielded a positive relationship with the leadership life skills development scale. Female FFA members also had higher leadership life skill development indicators than the male members (Dormody & Seevers, 1994). Wingenbach and Kahler (1997) replicated the Dormody and Seevers (1994) study and found that achievement expectancy, FFA activities, and gender had positive relationships with leadership life skill development.

Leadership Skills Inventory

The Leadership Skills Inventory (LSI), developed in 1980 at Iowa State University by Carter and Townsend (Townsend, 1981), was used to assess student self-perceptions of leadership skills. The LSI contains 21 statements describing various leadership and life skills. These statements correspond to five internal scales for analysis: working with groups, understanding self,

communicating, making decisions, and leadership. Reliability coefficients on the original instrument ranged from .41-.79. Other researchers have used the LSI to measure the self-perceived leadership skills of FFA members (Townsend & Carter, 1983; Dodson, 1995), collegiate women (Thorp et al., 1998), and 4-H Club members (Boyd, 1991).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to further explore leadership development in FFA members. The specific objectives for this study were to describe (1) the characteristics of participants attending the FFA Washington Leadership Conference, and (2) the characteristics that correlate strong self-perceptions of an FFA member's abilities with the LSI scales of ability to lead, to make decisions, to work in groups, to understand self, and to communicate.

Based on the purpose and objectives of this study, four null research hypotheses were formulated and tested. All references to self-perceived leadership skills include the five internal scales: working with groups, understanding self, communicating, making decisions, and leadership.

H₀₁= There is no relationship between FFA chapter size and WLC participants' self-perceived leadership skills.

H₀₂= There is no relationship between length of FFA membership and WLC participants' self-perceived leadership skills.

H₀₃= There is no relationship between level of FFA involvement and WLC participants' self-perceived leadership skills.

H₀₄= There is no difference in self-perceived leadership skills between FFA members that have held an office at a local, district, or state level, and members that do not hold officer positions.

Procedures

Population

Data were collected at the 1997 Washington Leadership Conference in Washington, D.C. There were 2,086 FFA members in attendance representing 44 states, excluding Alaska, Delaware, Hawaii, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island. The self-selected respondents represented a convenience sample of 291 FFA members who completed the questionnaire during conference registration. Twelve of the questionnaires were unusable because of improper completion; therefore, the usable sample was 279 respondents representing 28 states. Some respondents did not complete all questions on the survey, as a result actual response numbers for specific questions may not be equal to the total number of survey respondents.

Instrumentation

The instrument used to assess the students' self-perception of leadership skills was the Leadership Skills Inventory (LSI), developed at Iowa State University in 1980 by Carter (Townsend, 1981). The original instrument consisted of 99 statements with 10 internal scales. The refined instrument (Townsend & Carter, 1983) consists of 21 statements corresponding to five internal scales for analysis: working with groups, understanding self, making decisions, communicating, and leadership. Responses were based on a five-point Likert-type scale with 5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=undecided, 2=disagree, and 1=strongly disagree. A higher numeric value attributed to a statement indicated a stronger agreement or self-perception of the skill. Subject responses for each statement within a scale were averaged to create an individual response for each scale. Other researchers using the refined instrument (Thorp et al., 1998; Boyd, 1991) reported reliabilities of .63 to .83 and .65 to .83, respectively. The statements used on the survey instrument to measure subjects' skills in these areas are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Internal Scales for Leadership Skills Inventory

Scale	Item #	Statement	Reliabilities	
			Thorp	Boyd
Working with Groups	1.	I can cooperate and work in a group.	.75	.72
	2.	I get along with people around me.		
	4.	I believe in dividing the work among group.		
	8.	I listen carefully to opinions of group.		
	12.	I believe that group members are responsible.		
Understanding Self	3.	I feel responsible for my actions.	.67	.75
	5.	I understand myself.		
	13.	I am sure of my abilities.		
	17.	I accept who I am.		
	18.	I feel responsible for my decisions.		
Communicating	10.	I can lead a discussion.	.73	.69
	14.	I am a good listener.		
	19.	I can give clear directions.		
	20.	I can follow directions.		
Making Decisions	7.	I consider all choices before making a decision.	.63	.65
	11.	I use past experiences in making decisions.		
	15.	I use information in making decisions.		
Leadership	6.	I feel comfortable teaching others.	.83	.83
	9.	I am respected by others my age.		
	10.	I can lead a discussion.		
	16.	I feel comfortable being a group leader.		
	19.	I can give clear directions.		
	21.	I can run a meeting.		

Cronbach's alpha coefficient was computed for each of the five measurement scales. The reliabilities for the five scales were: working with groups-.69, understanding self-.78, communicating-.74, making decisions-.69, and leadership-.84.

Data Collection

This study incorporated correlation and causal-comparative design applications. The dependent variable was the LSI score. Independent variables were chapter size, years of participation, number of activities, and officer positions held. Random sampling of the population was not possible because participants were able to self-select participation by completing the survey during conference registration. To

determine statistical significance, an alpha level of .05 was established *a priori* based on previous studies by Boyd (1991) and Thorp et al. (1998) using the LSI.

Data were gathered during registration for the Washington Leadership Conference (WLC) to avoid confounding effects from emotional or educational changes to respondents related to conference participation. In an effort to ensure anonymity of the subjects, the researchers were not present during data collection. The conference coordinators agreed to carry out the necessary steps for gathering the data.

Limitations of the study included self-selected participation by the subjects and on-site distribution of the surveys by conference coordinators at three of the seven sessions. It is also recognized by the researchers that

the data reflects leadership perceptions of respondents assumed to be leaders because of their participation in the leadership conference. Therefore, this study provides a description of self-perceived leadership skills; it is not generalizable to all FFA members or WLC participants.

In late May, packets of questionnaires were mailed to the WLC coordinators. The questionnaire included demographic questions pertaining to age, state of residence, gender, family background, and the LSI. It also contained instructions for entering answers on the scantron form and information assuring the protection of the subjects' anonymity. Registration coordinators returned the completed scantrons to the researcher in October. The scantron was scored and the information was entered into a computer for analysis. Data were analyzed using the personal computer version of SPSS®.

Results

Age distribution of respondents was: 38 (13.6%) subjects 15 years old or younger, 99 (35.5%) 16 years old, 132 (47.3%) 17 years old, and 10 (3.6%) were 18 years old. Females represented 56.6% ($n=158$) of the respondents, 43.4% ($n=121$) were male. Seventy-six percent ($n=213$) of the respondents indicated that their hometown

population was 10,000 or less. Students entering their senior year of high school made up 55.2% ($n=154$) of the respondents with 73% ($n=204$) of the respondents indicating plans to attend a 4-year college program following graduation.

FFA Chapter Size and LSI scores

H_{01} = There is no relationship between FFA chapter size and WLC participants' self-perceived leadership skills.

Spearman correlations were analyzed between the 5 LSI measurement scales and 11 categories of chapter size. These categories were 1-15 members ($n=2$), 16-30 members ($n=28$), 31-45 members ($n=32$), 46-60 members ($n=42$), 61-75 members ($n=29$), 76-90 members ($n=30$), 91-105 members ($n=28$), 106-120 members ($n=17$), 121-135 members ($n=12$), 136-150 members ($n=20$), and 151 or more members ($n=34$). The findings for H_{01} are shown in Table 2.

Statistically significant, but weak relationships occurred between FFA chapter size and the LSI scales of working with groups ($r=.135$) and decision making ($r=.220$), but not the scales understanding self, communicating, or leadership. As chapter size increased, there was a tendency for respondents' self-perceived ability to work with groups and make decisions to also increase.

Table 2
Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Between FFA Chapter Size¹ and LSI Score

LSI Scale ²	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Working With Groups	276	4.51	0.135	0.025*
Understanding Self	276	4.47	0.044	0.468
Communicating	276	4.26	0.116	0.053
Decision Making	274	4.29	0.220	0.000*
Leadership	267	4.14	0.107	0.081

¹FFA Chapter Size: 1= 1-15, 2=16-30, 3=31-45, 4=46-60, 5=61-75, 6=76-90, 7=91-105, 8=106-120, 9=121-135, 10=136-150, 11=151 or more; ²LSI Scale: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3= undecided, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree; **p*<.05

Length of FFA Membership and Leadership Self-Perceptions

H₀₂= There is no relationship between length of FFA membership and WLC participants' self-perceived leadership skills.

Correlations were made between the five LSI measurement scales and seven categories of length of FFA membership.

Possible responses were 1-year or less (*n*=39), 2 years (*n*=61), 3 years (*n*=104), 4 years (*n*=53), 5 years (*n*=12), or 6 years (*n*=5).

Significant relationships were not found for any of the five LSI measurement scales. This indicates that respondents' length of FFA membership may not influence self-perceived abilities. A summary of the results for H₀₂ are found in Table 3.

Table 3
Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Between Length of Membership¹ and LSI Score

LSI Scale ²	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Working with Groups	276	4.51	0.019	0.755
Understanding Self	276	4.47	- 0.010	0.866
Communicating	276	4.26	0.057	0.342
Decision Making	274	4.29	-0.057	0.344
Leadership	267	4.14	0.078	0.205

¹Length of Membership in the FFA: 1=One year or less, 2=Two years, 3=Three Years, 4=Four Years, 5=Five Years, 6=Six Years; ²LSI Scale: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3= undecided, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree; **p*<.05

Level of FFA Involvement and Leadership Self-Perceptions

H₀₃= There is no relationship between level of FFA involvement and WLC participants' self-perceived leadership skills.

Correlations were made for H₀₃ between all five LSI measurement scales and level of participation in three categories of FFA events. The three categories included: FFA leadership camps, FFA leadership workshops/conferences, and FFA leadership activities, such as career development events

or demonstrations. Possible responses ranged from no participation in any category; participating in one camp, conference, or activity; to participating in up to 10 or more camps, conferences, or activities. Subjects responded individually for each category to minimize repetitive application of events in multiple categories; then the categories were collapsed into a single involvement variable for analysis. Table 4 summarizes the category frequencies used in the variable created from the three involvement scales.

Table 4
Response Frequencies for Involvement Variable

No. of Activities	<i>n</i>	Cumulative %
1	15	5.4
2	39	19.4
3	45	35.5
4	44	51.3
5	54	70.6
6	32	82.1
7	19	88.9
8	24	97.5
9	5	99.3
10 or more	2	100.0
Total	279	

Statistically significant relationships were found for all five of the LSI measurement scales (Table 5). The more

involved respondents were, the stronger they perceived their leadership abilities to be.

Table 5

Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Between Level of Involvement¹ in the FFA and LSI Score

LSI Scale ²	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Working with Groups	276	4.51	0.126	0.037*
Understanding Self	276	4.47	0.148	0.015*
Communicating	276	4.26	0.217	0.000*
Decision Making	274	4.29	0.141	0.020*
Leadership	267	4.14	0.290	0.000*

¹Level of Involvement: Cumulative scale combining responses about FFA leadership workshops/conferences; FFA leadership camps, and FFA leadership activities (contests, demonstrations); ²LSI Scale: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3= undecided, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree; * $p < .05$

Officer Positions Held and Leadership Self-Perceptions

H₀₄= There is no difference in self-perceived leadership skills between FFA members that have held an office at a local, district, or state level, and members that do not hold officer positions.

A t-test for independent means was used to test hypothesis four. Mean scores of all five LSI measurement scales were compared

for FFA members who held committee chair or no officer positions and FFA members who held local, district, state, or national officer positions. The respondents who held an office had significantly higher scores for the LSI measurement scale of leadership. Differences between groups were not statistically significant for the LSI measurement scales of working with groups, making decisions, communicating, and understanding self. The results for H₀₄ are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6
T-test for Independent Samples: Highest FFA Officer Position Held¹ and LSI Score

LSI Scale ²	Number Reponses		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	2-Tail Prob.
	Total = 277				
Working with Groups					
Committee Chair or No position	63		4.505	0.387	0.858
Local-National Office	213		4.516	0.425	
Understanding Self					
Committee Chair or No position	63		4.441	0.504	0.606
Local-National Office	213		4.477	0.476	
Communication					
Committee Chair or No position	62		4.149	0.593	0.084
Local-National Office	214		4.297	0.590	
Decision Making					
Committee Chair or No position	61		4.251	0.540	0.582
Local-National Office	213		4.296	0.560	
Leadership					
Committee Chair or No position	60		3.969	0.713	0.021*
Local-National Office	207		4.190	0.628	

¹Highest FFA Officer Position Held: 1=Committee Chair or No position, 2=Local-National Office

²LSI Scale: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3= undecided, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree; *p<.05

Conclusions and Discussion

The FFA instills in its members the belief that everyone can be a leader. However, individuals do not possess all the skills or expertise to always lead; therefore, the leadership role must be transferable within the group. Researchers have found that students who have been members of the FFA possess more leadership and personal development abilities than nonmembers (Stewart, et al., 1985). This study supports the positive relationship between FFA participation and self-perceptions of leadership.

The results showed a weak relationship between chapter size and respondents' self-perceptions of their leadership skills. The LSI scores on the self-perceived skills: working with groups and making decisions,

increased slightly as chapter size increased. There were no statistically significant relationships between chapter size and understanding self, communicating, and leadership. It is possible that larger FFA chapters provide students that attended WLC with more occasions to practice the leadership skills related to working with groups and making decision, thereby strengthening their self-perceptions. The current literature concerning leadership research does not address chapter or organization size as a factor in leadership training or perceptions, only as a component of subordinate satisfaction.

Length of FFA membership did not indicate a relationship to the self-perceived leadership skills of the WLC participants. However, results concerning level of FFA involvement supported research of several

authors (Townsend & Carter, 1983; Ricketts & Newcomb, 1984; Dormody & Seevers, 1994; Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997) who found that leadership traits of youth are enhanced by participation in FFA activities. This study supports the findings of Ricketts and Newcomb (1984), who found a correlation between the leadership abilities of FFA members and the level of activity by an individual within the chapter. The positive, though not strong, correlation between level of involvement and the five LSI scales reinforces the impact of practice on these leadership skills. Leadership is a continual learning process (Frigon & Jackson, 1996) that would naturally be influenced by involvement in activities. WLC participants who have been more active in FFA may have had more opportunities to practice their skills in communication, working with groups, making decisions, leadership, and understanding themselves. This practice, in turn, develops their confidence and self-perception of their abilities to perform these skills.

The interdependence of practice and involvement supports the recent program initiatives to strengthen local agricultural education programs. The model of agricultural education developed by Kapostasy (National FFA Organization, 2001) breaks the education process into categories of “how we teach” and “what we teach” (Staller, 2001). Classroom activities and SAEs reinforce the academic, technical, and career-oriented knowledge of the “what we teach” category. While FFA participation most strongly emphasizes the life skill component (Staller, 2001). The LPS initiative also incorporates the combination of classroom and experiential learning components to skill application (National FFA Organization, 2001).

Holding an officer position was related to WLC participants’ scores on the LSI scale leadership. Officers often have access to additional leadership training that other members do not. Officer roles include expectations to perform different functions than other members, including running meetings, speaking at functions, and assisting in training new members and officers. The current literature does not

explore officer positions as an influencing factor for leadership skill development.

Recommendations and Implications for Practice

1. It is recommended that chapters review the opportunities available to members. Working with other chapters, student groups, or community organizations may increase the number and type of activities available to members. Expanding available opportunities will create more areas of involvement for FFA members and more practice to enhance their self-perception of the leadership skill areas.
2. It is recommended that FFA members be encouraged to hold at least a local chapter officer position. Officer positions provide opportunities for FFA members to practice and develop all five areas measured by the LSI.
3. It is recommended that quantity and quality of participation rather than length of membership be stressed in FFA programs. The opportunity to experience and practice skills through FFA activities is the more important factor in developing leadership skills.
4. Additional research is recommended relating to group size and leadership skill self-perceptions. Further inquiry may provide a greater understanding of the influence group, chapter, or organizational size has on development of leadership skills.
5. Additional research should be conducted to determine if membership in the FFA creates a difference in the self-perceived ability to understand one's self between FFA members and other students. This will provide the groundwork to determine what influences the understanding self-scale of the LSI.
6. Students who do not participate in youth organizations also should be

studied using similar methods to develop an understanding of the differences between members of youth organizations and other students.

7. A similar study should also be conducted with other national youth organizations, such as VICA, DECA, the Boy Scouts of America, the Girl Scouts of America and 4-H, that utilize leadership education to create a larger picture of youth leadership training.

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