

## **Leadership Characteristics of Outstanding Seniors in a Land-Grant University College of Agriculture**

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### **Abstract**

Leadership is a concept that has always been a major component of Colleges of Agriculture. Undergraduate student have numerous opportunities to develop their leadership skills and abilities through formal coursework, collegiate organizations, and personal leadership activities. This ethnographic qualitative research study investigated the leadership characteristics of outstanding seniors in the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences (CFAES) at The Ohio State University. The study utilized a semi-structured interview methodology. The objectives of the study were to 1) Determine the leadership development experiences of the outstanding seniors prior to their enrolling in college, 2) Identify the leadership development activities in which they participated during their undergraduate studies, 3) Identify their self-perceived strengths, weaknesses, and leadership influences, 4) Identify the personal and professional leadership goals. Results indicate that the outstanding seniors had significant leadership

development experiences in FFA and 4-H while in high school. They continued to participate in leadership activities in dozens of different collegiate organizations, both within and outside of the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences. The outstanding seniors had a passionate belief in their own leadership ability, believed strongly in servant leadership, and used their leadership to the benefit of the organizations in which they were members.

## **Introduction**

Throughout the decades there have been numerous authors and researchers who have studied the concept of leadership. Bennis and Nanus (1985) stated that “decades of academic analysis have given us more than 350 definitions of leadership” (p. 4). They went on to discuss the importance of leadership by writing, “Leadership is what gives an organization its vision and its ability to translate that vision into reality” (p. 20).

The food, fiber, and natural resources system is no different. Agricultural businesses, commodity organizations, non-profit groups, and government agencies need competent leaders who will provide direction and vision for the future of the agricultural industry. A study on agriculture and the undergraduate student by the National Research Council (1992) stated:

Graduates of colleges of agriculture must deal with new science, which consists of biotechnology, information technologies (computing, robotics, microelectronics), concerns for the environment, energy conservation and use, new materials (both food and nonfood products), trade and policy issues, and human capital. These are great challenges indeed; and colleges of agriculture must prepare students to address the challenges of change, conflict, communication, cooperation, competitiveness, and control (p. 80).

In their revolutionary book on leadership development, Kouzes and Posner (1989) discussed leadership when they wrote:

Leadership myth says that leaders are “charismatic,” that they possess some special gift... To be sure, leaders must be energetic and enthusiastic. But a leader’s dynamism does not come from special powers. It comes from a strong belief in a purpose and a willingness to express that conviction. (p. *xvi*)

Undergraduate students in colleges of agriculture are undergoing a transition from inexperienced youth in high school clubs, to mature leaders in collegiate

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organizations. The years they spend in colleges of agriculture are vital to their leadership development and preparation as future leaders of agricultural businesses and organizations. It is critically important that faculty, advisors, researchers, and administrators in land-grant university colleges of agriculture pay close attention to the leadership development of the undergraduates in their institutions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

During the 1990s, the number of leadership development courses taught at land-grant colleges began to increase. In 1993, Schumacher and Swan investigated the need for formal leadership training for students in a land-grant college of agriculture. Not surprisingly, they found that students enrolled in the College of Agriculture believed that leadership training is needed at the college level.

Leadership skills possessed by college of agriculture graduates were researched by McKinley, Birkenholz, and Stewart (1993) and by Birkenholz and Schumacher (1994). Birkenholz and Schumacher (1994) concluded that, "College participation in departmental clubs, fraternities/sororities, student government, professional/honorary societies, and intramurals were activities that were significantly related to the perceived leadership development of the respondents" (p. 5). Additional researchers studied leadership attitudes of college students (Cummins, Townsend, Briers, & Shinn, 1995) and women's self-perceived leadership skills in a collegiate agricultural education course (Townsend & Thorp, 1997; Thorp, Cummins, Townsend, 1998).

Viegas, Brun, and Hausafus (1998) studied leadership development within undergraduate women majoring in family and consumer sciences. The researchers found a weak relationship between the students' GPA, the number of organizational memberships, the number of leadership positions held in organizations and their total scores on the Leadership Practices Inventory. As a result, the researchers concluded that, "leadership development may be attained irrespective of these attribute variables if students are sufficiently motivated and act proactively to pursue their leadership goals" (p. 49).

Kolb, Karau, Steven, and Eagly (1999) investigated the effect of attitudes toward leadership development of undergraduate students. The researchers reported that leadership experience was a significant predictor of leader emergence. The authors concluded that, "It can be said with some degree of confidence, then, that self-reported leadership attitude and leadership experience can be used to predict those individuals who are likely to emerge as leaders" (p. 316).

College students experience organizational leadership opportunities beyond the formal college classroom. Researchers have investigated how students involvement with both learning communities and agricultural youth organizations influenced their academic performance, retention (Ball, Garton, & Dyer, 2001), and degree completion (Ball & Garton, 2002).

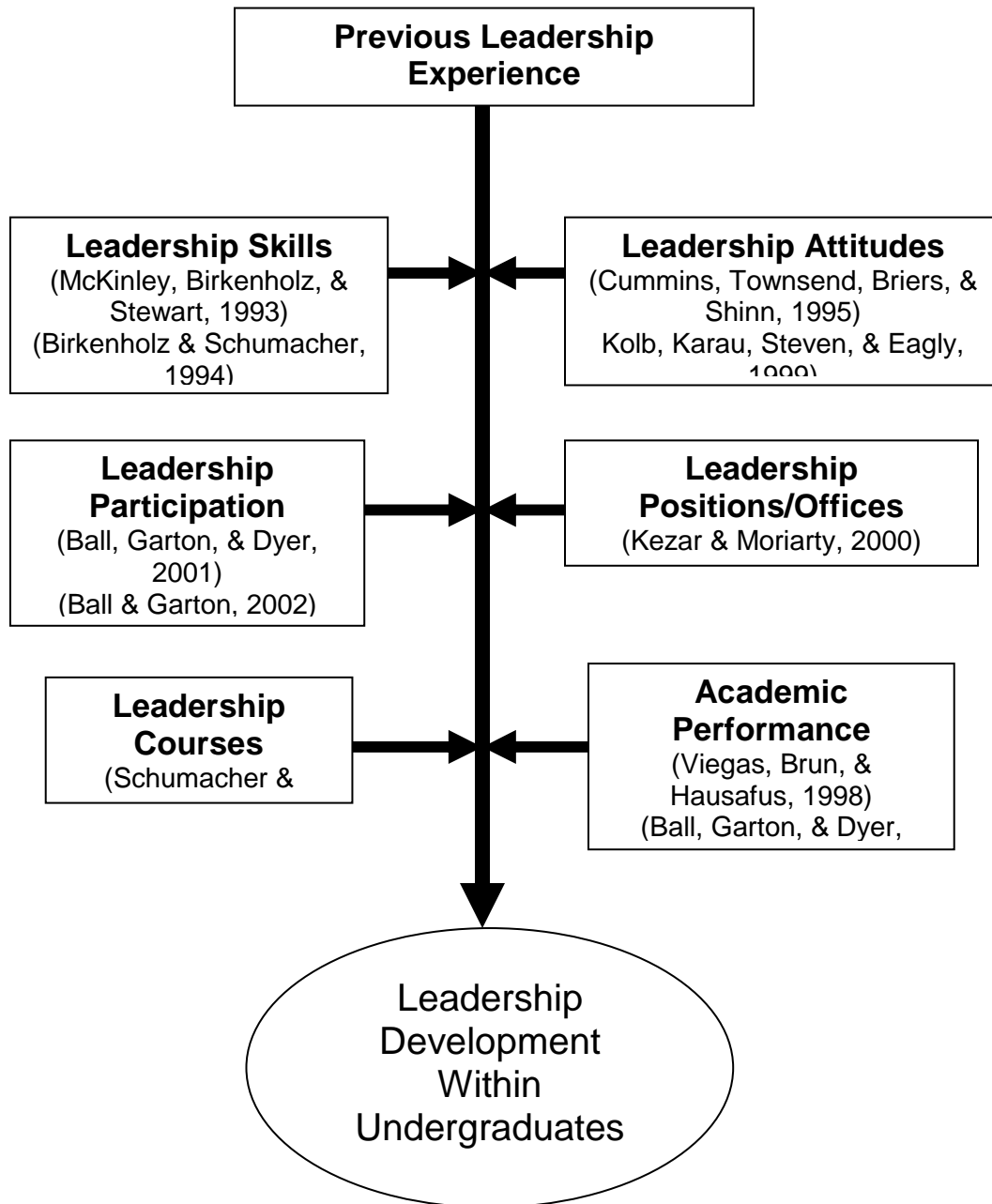
In a study on the relationship of leadership development with gender and ethnic identity, Kezar and Moriarty (2000) found that being elected to an office within a collegiate organization was the strongest extracurricular predictor of leadership ability of Caucasian men and that participation in a leadership class was one of the strongest predictors of self-rating on leadership ability. The researchers concluded that, "Involvement opportunities are clearly important for the development of leadership among all groups..." (p. 67).

Park and Dyer (2003) investigated the contributions of agricultural education, FFA, and 4-H students to agricultural colleges. Based on their research, they concluded:

In traditional agricultural college organizations, FFA and 4-H members provided most of the leadership. FFA members, representing only one-third of student leaders, provided nearly half of the leadership to student organizations. 4-H members contributed an additional 37% of the leadership. Due to leadership in multiple organizations, 4-H and FFA members represent considerable student leadership potential to a college, especially in traditional organizations (p. 142)

These studies add to the theory of the importance of leadership development within undergraduate students in colleges of agriculture. Conceptually, Figure 1. displays the interaction of these theoretical tenets on leadership development. While the conceptual framework clarifies the concepts at hand, the authors recognize the substantial interaction and overlap inherent in leadership development. Consequently, despite the existence of numerous quantitative studies utilizing survey research methods, there remains a need to collect personal opinions, attitudes, comments, and recommendations from recognized collegiate leaders. Insights into the beliefs, values and attitudes of individuals will allow observers to gain a holistic in-depth understanding of the phenomena studied (Merriam, 2002).

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



## **Objectives**

The purpose of the study was to determine the leadership characteristics, experiences and influences of the outstanding seniors in the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences (CFAES) at The Ohio State University. The objectives that guided the study included:

1. Determine the leadership development experiences of the outstanding seniors prior to their enrolling in college.
2. Identify the leadership development activities in which the outstanding seniors' participated during their undergraduate studies.
3. Identify the outstanding seniors' self-perceived strengths, weaknesses, and leadership influences.
4. Identify the personal and professional leadership goals of the outstanding seniors.

## **Methods and Procedures**

This study utilized ethnographic qualitative research methods. Qualitative research in education and the social sciences can produce vivid and richly detailed accounts of human experiences (Ary, Jacobs, and Razavieh, 1996). Borg and Gall (1983) defines ethnography as "an in-depth analytical description of an intact cultural scene" (p. 492). Ary, Jacobs, and Razavieh (1996) further described the process of ethnographic research when they wrote, "The researcher does fieldwork to find out the activities of the people, the physical characteristics of the situation, and what it feels like to be part of the situation" (p. 489)

The subjects for this qualitative study were the outstanding seniors from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences at The Ohio State University. Each year the college selects the top 20 graduating seniors based on their academic performance, leadership, and service activities during their undergraduate career. The accessible population were the 20 outstanding seniors during spring quarter 2002.

Data was gathered using semi-structured interviews of the outstanding seniors. Borg and Gall (1983) stated that, "The semi-structured interview, therefore, has the advantage of being reasonably objective while still permitting a more thorough understanding of the respondent's opinions and the reasons behind them

than would be possible using the mailed questionnaire (p. 442). The researcher developed an interview guide which included questions relating to the objectives of the study. The interviews were tape recorded and pseudonyms used for the students to ensure the anonymity of their comments.

Trustworthiness of the results were established following the criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The subjects were not only interviewed but observed during college events and several had completed a leadership development course taught by the researcher. Transferability of the results was established by providing readers with a detailed description of methodology and interview questions used to reach the results and draw conclusions for the study. Dependability of the results can be established by following the methodology used in the study. The researcher kept detailed records including handwritten notes and audio-tapes of the interviews.

The authenticity of the results was addressed by the inclusion of direct quotations from the interviews. All data collected supports the conclusions and interpretations drawn by the researcher. One threat to the neutrality of this research is the self acknowledged bias of the researcher towards the importance of leadership development. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described neutrality as “the degree to which the findings of an inquiry are determined by the subjects (respondents) and conditions of the inquiry and not by the biases, motivations, interests, or perspectives of the inquirer” (p. 290). The researcher made every effort to establish the trustworthiness of the results and control the threat from researcher bias.

After conducting the interviews, the data was input into the QSR N6 qualitative analysis software program (Richards, 2002). This software program allowed for the comparison of data, and the exploration of previously unseen patterns, through the use of extensive coding. This allowed for the thorough analysis of extensive text necessary for this study. The results yield an in-depth look at the qualitative components of leadership development.

## **Results**

Interviews were conducted with 20 outstanding seniors from CFAES. The sample was comprised of seven males and 13 females. All of the subjects were from Ohio. Fifteen of the seniors were from rural farms, three were from rural non-farm, and two were from suburban areas of the state.

Objective 1 for the study was to determine the leadership development experiences of the outstanding seniors prior to their enrolling in college. As expected, a majority of the students were active in 4-H and FFA. This is similar to the results of the study conducted by Park and Dyer (2003) when they reported that FFA and 4-H members provided most of the leadership within college organizations.

It should be noted that almost all of the subjects were members of the National Honor Society (NHS). After NHS, the next largest area of involvement was church youth groups. Students involved in leadership show a well balanced approach to life, indicated by involvement in community and church groups. Many of the students were involved in Students Against Drunk Driving (SADD), demonstrating a civic awareness rare in today's students. Surprisingly, the results show little participation in athletics. In actuality, more students were involved in music than sports. Most of the students professed high school involvement in five or six activities at a time, which some self-diagnosed as possibly bordering on over-involvement.

The subjects identified dozens of different leadership development activities in which they participated while in high school. These ranged from FFA and 4-H camps, church camps, leadership development workshops, fair boards, to livestock expos and conferences. When asked to rate their leadership skills prior to college, slightly more than half of students indicated average abilities in leadership. However, there were several students who indicated they possessed highly developed leadership skills. None of the students indicated a perceived lack of leadership ability, demonstrating a confidence in their abilities at the high school level.

A sample of the comments on their leadership development while in high school included:

- “Not perfect, but higher than other students” - Jill
- “I was looked at as a strong leader”- Marissa
- “I like to lead, not follow” - Ted
- “People turned to me for advice” - Bob
- “Good to outstanding leadership skills” - Jan
- “I was an officer in every club. I didn't want to sit back in a position, I wanted to be in a leadership role.” – Trisha
- “Extensive organizational skills, active, wanted to lead and be good at it, Hubris, I like being in charge” - Bill



Objective 2 was to identify the leadership development activities of the outstanding seniors. As the subjects enrolled in the CFAES at Ohio State they continued to show involvement in multiple leadership development organizations. However, in addition many began taking advantage of government councils and professional sororities and fraternities. Not surprisingly, sports is limited to minimal involvement in intramural activities. Students are actively involvement in numerous collegiate organizations; most are active in three or more. Some of the organizations included Saddle & Sirlain, Collegiate 4-H, Ag Ed Society, Dairy Club, Pre-Vet Club, and ANR Council.

Most continue to rate their level of participation similar to high school. All of the respondents indicated they had continued to serve as officers or committee chairs within the collegiate organizations. However a few indicate being “only a member,” of some organizations. This may be do to increased work load, stress, or over-involvement in too many organizations. This result was similar to that of Kezar and Moriarty (2000) when they found that being elected to an office within an organization was the strongest extracurricular predictor of leadership ability.

The outstanding seniors took advantage of numerous leadership development activities related to their collegiate organizations. Most had participated in workshops, regional or national conventions. Many helped their organizations host or conduct these leadership activities for other students or college organizations.

Several of the outstanding seniors took advantage of leadership activities outside of the college of agriculture. An example of some of these include the National Collegiate Scholars Honorary Society, Mortar Board, Hall/Floor Councils, and Golden Key Honor Society.

Some of the respondents’ quotes on their leadership development in collegiate leadership organizations include:

- “Very active” - Danielle
- “Very active religious and life officer” - Jennifer
- “Behind the scenes officer” - Anna
- “Very high participation, I was an officer every year” - Kathy
- “Very active, attend all meetings and events” - Trisha
- “Club committee member, Vice President for 2 years, Vice Noble Ruler Scholarship in Fraternity, Athletic Chair, Historian” - John

The outstanding seniors were also asked their opinion on leadership development efforts, both formal and informal, within the college of agriculture. Many of the

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students had completed the one formal leadership development course offered within the college. However, many of the subjects were not even aware of the existence of the Leadership Center located within the college and open to use by any student. Few had taken advantage of the leadership development books, videos, presentations, or workshops offered by the Leadership Center.

Some of the comments on leadership development efforts within CFAES at Ohio State included:

- “Abundance of opportunities, everything is there, classes and organizations make it difficult. This college is successful, provides opportunities within clubs to help and serve as officers. A leader isn’t just the person who is out there in front.” - Brenda
- “Don’t recognize fraternities for contribution to leadership development. They’re looked down on, misconceptions.” - Jim
- “Don’t know if development of leaders happens. Leaders at the college level are always the same. It is always the same leaders, too many irons in the fire, stretched too thin. Don’t be a member of 8 organizations.” - Jack
- “I’m disappointed in the college. There was a drop off compared to high school in activity in clubs, only meeting weekly for ½ hour for social event. Didn’t do anything, meeting had no purpose.” - Bill
- “Active if you want to be, can’t make someone be a leader. When people are pushed, encouraged, and/or challenged is the only way to get people involved. We are losing people who have potential to be a leader and are capable. FFA/4-H people are active right away, others need encouragement.” Carol
- “They don’t applaud outside involvement across the river. Way too much emphasis on staying on ag campus. Missing opportunities. Way too many cliques like in high school.” - Tracie

The students clearly had strong opinions of the leadership development efforts within the college. Their comments indicated the college could be doing a better job of leadership development among all students, college and university organizations, and outside groups such as agriculture fraternities and sororities.

Objective 3 was to identify the outstanding seniors’ self-perceived leadership strengths, weaknesses, and influences. Strengths identified by the subjects included the ability to collaborate and work in teams, developing rapport to reach-out, recruit, and motivate other students. Mentoring and communications skills were also listed as leadership strengths by several students. Interestingly, many students listed shyness and being opinionated as their weaknesses. Not

surprisingly, many also listed being over-involved in too many organizations as a detriment to their leadership.

When asked about the organization or individual that had the most influence on their leadership development while in college, a majority indicated club involvement as the primary source of leadership development. Around half of the outstanding seniors listed professional organizations. A majority of the subjects identified professors or academic advisors as having a significant influence on their leadership development. Only three of the students indicated that their parents were major influences on their personal leadership while they were a student in college. This may be due to the fact that the students interacted more with their professors and advisors than they did with their parents due to being away from home. These individuals influenced the students by giving them the faith to succeed, helping them stand up and communicate for themselves, making them feel special, believing in their leadership, and not allowing them to pass up opportunities to improve themselves.

Objective 4 asked the outstanding seniors to identify their personal and professional leadership goals. Almost all of the outstanding seniors anticipated participating in some form of community leadership program and holding leadership positions in professional organizations. In addition, all but one of the subjects indicated they wanted to continue their participation in leadership/service organizations and work with youth leadership development activities. Some of the comments made by the seniors include:

- “Very open to leadership opportunities.” - Jan
- “I want to focus on organizations in the agricultural industry.” - Danielle
- “I am open to anything, relationships are the way we function. I like to participate, speak with people.” - Ted
- “I love leadership, public communications, making people think, and working with organizations.” – Jill

A question that resulted in the greatest variety of responses was if the outstanding seniors anticipated running for any type of local, county, state, or national political office. Respondents were evenly split on their interest in holding a political position. About half of the students responded with emphatic “No” to the question. The other half not only answered “Yes,” but easily offered the position they planned on running for. Some of the responses included:

- “Possibly Township Clerk.” - Bill
- “Possibly school board” - Kathy

- “NO, I’ve seen enough politics!” - Anna
- “Possibly lobbying” - Jennifer
- “Yes, I want to be a veterinarian first, then run for City Council or a state office.” - Jim
- “Township Trustee” – Bob
- “School Board, possibly County Commissioner” - Susie

The outstanding seniors were also asked to share their leadership philosophy as they completed their undergraduate studies and prepare for their future. These comments included:

- “Never quit trying, never try quitting, perseverance, dedication to leadership role.” - Jennifer
- “If you’re a leader you’re in a position of service, to serve others. Follow your vision as you influence others.” - Marissa
- “More than influence, leaders need results, moving forward in the same direction with other. Not just see one person’s vision, coming together with a common vision.” - Tracie
- “Everyone can be a leader, they must be willing to work, start at the bottom. It will only happen with a strong work ethic.” - Danielle
- “You get out of an organization what you put into it, only if you are willing to sacrifice time or go the extra mile.” - Kathy
- “Get the most you can out of members. Leave the club or organization in better shape than when you joined, leave a legacy.” - Steve
- “Lead by example. Know that leadership is needed, don’t waste time and energy on unimportant things.” - Jan
- “The more involved you are, the more experience you will get, the more you will learn from others, picking up on their leadership styles.” - Susie
- “Being a leader means working with others in organizations. Developing younger people to be strong leaders through mentorship for our future.” - Susan

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

McCutcheon (as cited in Ary, D., Jacobs, L.C., & Razavieh, A., 1996) discussed the interpretation of qualitative data when he wrote,

When qualitative inquirers interpret or explain the meaning of events, actions, and so forth, they generally use one of the following types of interpretation: (1) the construction of patterns through the analysis and

resynthesis of constituent parts, (2) the interpretation of the social meaning of events, or (3) the analysis of the relationships between events and external factors. (p. 476)

The qualitative, semi-structured interview of the outstanding seniors in the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences resulted in a large amount of rich information on the concept of leadership development within undergraduate students. Based on the comments of the subjects, it can be concluded that leadership is a process that develops over time and is influenced by an individual's personal characteristics, experiences, and influences. Leadership participation and aspirations can and do change as a student moves from high school to college and on to adulthood. Students recognize the need for involvement in leadership development organizations to improve their personal leadership and professional skills.

It was clearly evident that the outstanding seniors were influenced more by their participation in collegiate organizations and personal influences than they were by formal leadership coursework, books, or other instructional materials. This supports the findings of Kezar and Moriarty (2000) when they concluded that, "Involvement opportunities are clearly important for the development of leadership among groups..." (p. 67)

There seems to be a gap between formal and informal leadership development within the college. Many students indicated they thought the college could be doing a better job of leadership development within undergraduate students. Some students suggested that fraternities and sororities were not viewed as viable organizations to develop leaders. Another student indicated that within collegiate organizations, too much of the leadership was concentrated within a small number of individuals. Additionally, leadership positions and responsibilities were not delegated to the majority of organization members.

The outstanding seniors indicated pursuing leadership development opportunities as adolescent high school students. They were always looking for opportunities to develop their own leadership abilities, work within teams, provide leadership to groups, committees, and entire organizations, and provide service to others. It is clear from the interviews that a large majority of these recognized leaders see themselves as servant leaders who always try to utilize their leadership for the betterment of organizations or society. It is this attitude of success that is the most important attribute of leaders. Kolb, Karau, Steven, and Eagly (1999) indicated the importance of a positive attitude when they stated, "self-reported leadership attitude and leadership experience can be used to predict those

individuals who are likely to emerge as leaders” (p. 316).

These individuals sought out others for guidance and mentoring. They relied heavily on their professors and academic advisors. The outstanding seniors felt that their advisors/mentors “wouldn’t let me fail,” and “expected success” from them. Failure in their academic studies or in their collegiate organizations was not an option. All 20 of the undergraduates were willing to work long and hard to achieve the success they expected of themselves. They were not willing to take the easy route through college and worked hard to achieve success in undergraduate studies and collegiate organizations.

Students recognized and expressed concern for the development of their peers. At the same time these individuals were succeeding, they had concerns for the leadership development of the vast majority of the other undergraduate students in the college of agriculture. Perhaps this awareness and sensitivity towards peers can be utilized by college administrators to develop additional leadership experiences for students.

Each year the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences recognizes the top 20 outstanding seniors. Virtually all of the seniors who are recognized with this achievement are viewed as outstanding leaders within collegiate organizations and the college in general. However, there is no coherent, logical framework within the college to develop leadership skills within all undergraduates. It is clear that the students recognize the lack of focus on leadership development within the College of Agriculture.

Based on the results and conclusions of this study, it is recommended that CFAES organize a task force to research the leadership development needs of undergraduates and the structure of leadership opportunities offered to students. Currently, a disconnected “hodge-podge” of leadership development opportunities exists. These include a formal course in leadership, collegiate organizations, fraternities and sororities, and the Leadership Center. Support should be maintained for those areas that students identify as impacting leadership development. In addition, recognized leaders expressed concern for the leadership opportunities of other students. Courses, seminars and practical experiences should be developed which allow student leaders the opportunity to positively increase leadership opportunities and education for their peers. Professors and academic mentors appear vital to leadership development, and their participation in collegiate organizations should be encouraged and supported by departmental and college administration.

Leadership is an outward expression of an inward framework, built upon the convictions and ideals attained from interaction with others. As the future of the food, fiber, and natural resources industry changes, the need for skilled, competent, and dedicated leaders will continue to grow. Students in every major within the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences have a need for formal and informal leadership development during their collegiate program. The comments and suggestions of the outstanding seniors provide insight, direction and evidence of the importance of leadership development for all undergraduate students within the CFAES at The Ohio State University.

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## **Biography**

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