

## **Student Leadership Practices of Georgia FFA Success Conference Participants**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to assess the leadership practices or behaviors of FFA members participating in a leadership development workshop known as the Success Conference in Georgia. Leadership practices were determined using the *Student Leadership Practices Inventory* (LPI) (Kouzes & Posner, 1998). While success conference participants scored the highest on *encouraging the heart* ( $M = 23.77$ ;  $SD = 4.18$ ) and *enabling others to act* ( $M = 23.75$ ;  $SD = 4.40$ ), placing Georgia FFA members participating in the Success Conference at approximately the 45<sup>th</sup> and 35<sup>th</sup> percentile respectively for all Student LPI scores, this was slightly below Kouzes' and Posner's (1998) normative data for high school students. It is recommended that future leadership development opportunities focus on activities that foster collaboration, strengthen others, recognize the contributions of others, and celebrate team accomplishments.

## **Introduction**

The late President John F. Kennedy once suggested that learning and leadership are indispensable to one another. This rings true in State FFA Associations, as agricultural educators have widely ascribed to the belief that students learn leadership through participation in FFA Leadership Development Events. In fact, “the development of agricultural leadership skills has been one of the primary aims of the National FFA Organization since its inception in 1928” (Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997, p. 18). Preparing young people with the leadership skills that future employers seek could also be viewed as agricultural education’s greatest task. This study seeks to determine if leadership is actually a part of an active FFA member’s life.

Many agricultural education researchers have reported that leadership is learned in and through the FFA (Ricketts, 1982; Ricketts & Rudd, 2004; Townsend & Carter, 1983; Brannon, Holley, & Key, 1989; Dormody & SeEVERS, 1994). Townsend and Carter (1983) found FFA activity participation was positively correlated with the leadership of 12<sup>th</sup> grade agricultural education students (pp. 20-25). Similarly, Ricketts (1982) gathered research from 12<sup>th</sup> grade male students and found that FFA members from both superior and non-superior FFA chapters possessed significantly more leadership and personal development abilities than students not associated with agricultural education. Furthermore, in an attempt to predict Youth Leadership Life Skill Development (YLLSD), Dormody and SeEVERS (1994) found a weak, but positive relationship between participation in the FFA and students’ YLLSD. Also, Ricketts and Rudd (2004) determined that agricultural education and the FFA were the most influential constructs for leadership development.

As encouraging as many of these studies are for leadership educators, there seems to be limited clarity about what it means to have developed one’s leadership skills and/or abilities. Stogdill (1974) summarized this lack of clarity by stating that, “there are almost as many definitions of leadership development as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept” (p. 259). Stogdill also surmised that leadership was defined as: personality or effectiveness of personality, the art of inducing compliance, the exercise of influence, a function of a set of acts or behaviors, a form of persuasion, a power of relationship, an instrument of goal achievement, an effective interaction, a differentiated role, and the initiation of structure.

Whereas Stogdill summarized many of the old-paradigm ideas of leadership, Kouzes and Posner focus on a more contemporary approach. They focus on the

leader as a person who can integrate, support, and serve fellows in the accomplishment of goals. According to Kouzes and Posner, leaders are those who challenge people, inspire a shared vision, enable others to act, set a good example, and encourage others to succeed. This study utilizes Kouzes' and Posner's (1998) *Student Leadership Practices Inventory* (LPI) to describe the leadership practices of Georgia FFA members participating in a leadership workshop sponsored by the Georgia FFA Association, called the "Success Conference."

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study begins with the leadership practices research of Kouzes and Posner (1995). After 20 years of research with more than 60,000 respondents, Kouzes and Posner established five leadership practices that are omnipresent in the leaders they observed. As previously mentioned, those leadership practices are challenging the process, enabling others to act, inspiring a shared vision, encouraging the heart, and modeling the way.

A leader who *challenges the process* searches out challenging opportunities to change, grow, innovate, and improve. They experiment, take risks, and learn from accompanying mistakes. Leaders who *inspire a shared vision* are able to envision an uplifting and noble future and enlisting others in a common vision by appealing to their values, interests, hopes, and dreams. *Enabling others to act* is a practice in which the leader fosters collaboration by promoting cooperative goals and building trust. This practice also involves strengthening people by giving power away, providing choice, developing competence, assigning critical tasks, and offering visible support. *Modeling the way* as a leader involves setting the example by behaving in ways that are consistent with shared values. This leader loves to achieve small wins that promote consistent progress and build commitment from followers. To *encouraging the heart* is to recognize individual contributions to the success of every project. A leader who encourages the heart celebrates team accomplishments regularly (Kouzes & Posner, 1995).

According to Kouzes and Posner (1997), leadership practices are measured behaviors, not measures of IQ, personality type, or management skills. A succinct conceptualization of what set of leadership behaviors are the "right" behaviors, the LPI consistently shows that "The more frequently you demonstrate the behaviors included in the LPI, the more likely you will be seen as an effective leader" (p. 6). Specifically, participants who regularly exhibit LPI behaviors are seen as:

- Being more effective in meeting job-related demands.

- Being more successful in representing their units to upper management.
- Creating higher-performing teams.
- Fostering loyalty and commitment.
- Increasing motivational levels and willingness to work hard.
- Reducing absenteeism, turnover, and dropout rates.
- Possessing high degrees of personal credibility.

Additionally, two separate empirical studies determined that these five leadership practices accounted for 65% (Posner & Brodsky, 1992) and 80% (Posner & Brodsky, 1994) of the variance in assessments of club/organization presidents' leadership effectiveness. Posner and Brodsky (1993) also found that students, who engaged in the five leadership practices most often, as compared to those who engaged in them less often, viewed themselves as more effective leaders.

The LPI has also been used to evaluate leadership behaviors in agricultural and extension education. Rudd (2000) analyzed the leadership styles of extension directors, and determined that these leaders self-reported that *enabling others to act* was their most frequent leadership behavior ( $M = 51.80$ ,  $SD = 4.30$ ) while *inspiring a shared vision* was their least frequent behavior ( $M = 44.50$ ,  $SD = 7.30$ ). Spotauski and Carter (1993) also looked at the leadership behaviors of department executive officers. They found that agricultural education executives were best at *enabling others to act* and needed help with *inspiring a shared vision* and *challenging the process* ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ). Woodrum and Safrit (2003) examined the leadership practices of West Virginia extension agents and determined, again, that *enabling others to act* was the behavior exhibited most frequently ( $M = 4.48$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ) and *inspiring a shared vision* was the leadership behavior used least often ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ).

Research using the LPI has confirmed that formal leadership education can be an effective method to increase positive leadership behaviors. Earnest (1996) discovered significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) pre- and posttest increases for each of the five leadership behaviors of community leadership program participants in Ohio. Brungardt (1997) also found significant increases in leadership behaviors from the beginning to the end of the Leadership Certificate Program at Fort Hays State University. *Challenging the process*, *inspiring a shared vision*, *enabling others to act*, and *modeling the way* behaviors were significantly ( $p < 0.001$ ) greater on the last day compared to the first day of the program.

Positive changes in leadership behavior as a result of FFA Leadership Development events have been assumed for years, but the specifics of this development have not been articulated. This study helps define the leadership

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benefits purported by the FFA. It also helps build the leadership practices theory base by surveying adolescent leaders, as few researchers have evaluated the leadership practices of secondary education students or FFA members.

Based on a synthesis of youth leadership research conducted by Ricketts, Osborne, and Rudd (2004), this study specifically focused on describing Success Conference participants'/FFA members' leadership behavior, along with a set of demographic variables that the Ricketts, et al. synthesis indicated contributes to that leadership behavior (age, gender, population density, the number of agriculture teachers and agriculture classes students had taken). Gender was of particular interest because Student LPI findings (Posner & Brodsky, 1993, 1994) thus far, have indicated no difference between males and females for any of the leadership behaviors. However, recent agricultural education research indicated supposed prominence of females in leadership positions in the FFA (Kelly & Osborne, 2004; Ricketts et al., 2004; Seevers & Dormody, 1994).

### **Purpose/Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to assess the leadership practices or behaviors of FFA members participating in a leadership development workshop known as the *Success Conference* in Georgia. Specific objectives of this study were the following:

- Describe FFA members attending the Success Conference in Georgia.
- Describe the leadership practices of FFA members attending the Success Conference.
- Compare leadership practices based on participant demographics.

### **Methods**

Participants ( $n = 111$ ) of the Success Conference, a leadership development workshop for FFA members sponsored by the Georgia Department of Agricultural Education, served as the purposive sample representing the target population of FFA leaders in Georgia. Upon submission of parental and personal consent forms, participants were asked to complete the *Student Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI)* (Kouzes & Posner, 1998). The design of the study was both descriptive and *ex post facto*, since the factors that were being identified were pre-existing (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1996). The design was employed to describe the present demographics of Success Conference participants and to identify the leadership practices of the sample of FFA leaders in Georgia.

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Leadership practices were determined via the *Student LPI* (Kouzes & Posner, 1998), which is a widely accepted and valid instrument used in leadership education research. Posner and colleagues have reported internal reliability scores of 0.66 for *challenging the process*, 0.79 for *inspiring a shared vision*, 0.70 for *enabling others to act*, 0.68 for *modeling the way*, and 0.80 for *encouraging the heart* (1998). Other researchers have reported reliabilities for the five leadership practices between 0.63 and 0.83 (Snyder, 1992) and 0.83 and 0.92 (Levy, 1995). Demographic data for this study was collected with a researcher-developed instrument. Gender, age, size of community, number of agriculture teachers, and number of agriculture classes were the variables analyzed with the demographic instrument.

Data was analyzed with descriptive statistics using SPSS and by comparing conference participants with normative data collected for *Student LPI*. Inferential statistics were not used in this study because of the sampling procedure, but simple comparisons between participants were also conducted.

## **Findings**

### **Objective One – Describe FFA members attending the Success Conference in Georgia**

Success conference participants were over 16 years of age. Half the participants were male and half were female. Eighty (71.4%) students were from a rural area, 16 (14.3%) were from a suburban area, and 12 (10.7%) students were from an urban area. Eighty percent reported having one to two agriculture teachers, and 78 (71%) students had at least two or more agricultural education courses (Table 1).

Table 1  
Demographic profile of Georgia Success Conference participants (n = 111)

Demographic Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	16.35	1.06
Gender	0.49	0.50
Rural/Suburban/Urban	1.40	0.76
# of Ag Teachers	1.78	0.94
# of Ag Classes	2.72	1.82

Objective 2 - Describe the leadership practices of FFA members attending the Success Conference

Success conference participants scored the highest on *encouraging the heart* ( $M = 23.77$ ;  $SD = 4.18$ ) placing Georgia FFA members participating in the Success Conference at approximately the 45<sup>th</sup> percentile for all Student LPI scores, and slightly below Kouzes' and Posner's (1998) normative data for high school students. *Enabling others to act* ( $M = 23.75$ ;  $SD = 4.40$ ) was the number two-ranked leadership practice of participants; however, this score placed participants in approximately the 35<sup>th</sup> percentile for all Student LPI scores and almost a full point below the normative data for similar high school students. Respectively, participants' 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> rated leadership practices were *inspiring a shared vision* ( $M = 23.04$ ;  $SD = 4.60$ ), *modeling the way* ( $M = 22.94$ ;  $SD = 4.18$ ), and *challenging the process* ( $M = 22.78$ ;  $SD = 3.96$ ). These scores placed Georgia FFA members/conference participants' in the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile for *inspiring a shared vision*, in the 55<sup>th</sup> percentile for *modeling the way*, and the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile for *challenging the process*. Participants' scores for inspire, model, and challenge were each higher than Kouzes' and Posner's normative scores for high school students.

Table 2  
Leadership practices of Success Conference participants in Georgia (n = 111)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Rank	Percentile	Normative Scores for High School Students
Encourage the Heart	23.77	4.18	1	45 <sup>th</sup>	24.18
Enabling Others to Act	23.75	4.40	2	35 <sup>th</sup>	24.72
Inspire a Shared Vision	23.04	4.60	3	60 <sup>th</sup>	21.89
Model the Way	22.94	4.18	4	55 <sup>th</sup>	22.02
Challenge the Process	22.78	3.96	5	60 <sup>th</sup>	21.62

Objective Three - Compare leadership practices based on participant demographics

A simple comparison of *Student LPI* mean scores by age, size of community, number of agriculture teachers, and number of agricultural courses taken indicated no leadership practice differences among the aforementioned variables. However, females outscored males on all five of the leadership practices.

Table 3  
Student LPI scores for female and male Success Conference participants

	Females			Males		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Encourage the Heart	54	24.61	4.01	57	22.97	4.22
Enabling Others to Act	54	24.67	4.30	57	22.88	4.35
Inspire a Shared Vision	54	23.91	4.90	57	22.21	4.17
Model the Way	54	23.89	3.97	57	22.04	4.20
Challenge the Process	54	23.59	4.10	57	22.02	3.70

## Conclusions and Implications

Objective One - Describe FFA members attending the Success Conference in Georgia

The average participant of the Georgia Success Conference was just over 16 years of age, but 95 out of 111 participants were either 15, 16, or 17 years of age. Information about conference participants' age should be important for future conference developers, since curriculum and informal learning opportunities are supposed to be age appropriate when offered (Shinn, Briers, Christiansen, Edwards, Harlin, Lawver, Lindner, Murphy, & Parr, 2003, p. 20). However, there was no noticeable difference between age categories for any of the leadership practices.

Most of the students were from a rural area, but given the need for added diversity in agricultural education and the National FFA Organization (Luft, 1996); leadership conference developers may need to continue designing the workshops with rural, suburban, and urban students in mind. Most participants had one to two agriculture teachers, and the large majority had taken at least two or more agricultural education courses, indicating that Success Conference participants were somewhat experienced agricultural education students and FFA members.

Success Conference participants were equally divided in terms of gender. This is an important finding for leadership conference designers in Georgia, since the 50% female participant figure for this study differs from the fact that only 38% of National FFA members are female (National FFA Organization, 2007). However, according to the National FFA Organization, females hold over 50% of the leadership positions, so the fact that half of the Success Conference participants were female should have been expected.

#### Objective 2 - Describe the leadership practices of FFA members attending the Success Conference

Success Conference participants were best at *encouraging the heart*, which involves recognizing individual contributions in a group and/or celebrating team accomplishments (Kouzes & Posner, 1998). Although Georgia Success Conference participants scored highest on *encouraging the heart*, they scored lower than Kouzes' and Posner's normative scores for similar high school-aged students. In fact, participants were only in the 45<sup>th</sup> percentile compared to other students who have taken the LPI. This phenomenon is repeated in participants' 2<sup>nd</sup> most frequent leadership behavior of *enabling others to act*, scoring in the 35<sup>th</sup> percentile. This behavior is about fostering collaboration and strengthening others.

Even though *inspiring a shared vision*, *modeling the way*, and *challenging the process* were 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> in terms of relative rank, participants' scores were higher than instrument developers' normative data for each leadership practice (Kouzes & Posner, 1998). Participants were more likely to envision an uplifting future for an organization and enlist others in a common vision, more likely to set the example and focus on achieving small wins, and more likely to search for opportunities, experiment, and take risks than the majority of other students who had completed the LPI.

#### Objective Three - Compare leadership practices based on participant demographics

Finally, gender was the only demographic variable with noticeable leadership practice differences. In fact, females scored higher than males on all five of the leadership practices. This finding supports Ricketts, et al. (2004) research where "females [were] more predominate in local FFA chapter officer teams and leadership activities than males" (p. 50) and Zielinski's (1999) reports that females have established themselves as a majority presence in student activities.

Reasoning for the recent, but apparent female superiority in leadership development is in short supply. However, researchers are starting to present some hypotheses that are worthy of investigation. The *Student LPI* measures leadership of a *transformational* orientation. According to Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen (2003) and Yoder (2001) transformational leadership may be especially advantageous for females. Transformational leadership may encompass “some behaviors that are consistent with the female gender role’s demand for supportive, considerate behaviors” (Eagly & Carli, 2003, p. 825). Eagly and Carli note two additional hypotheses for the rise in female leadership. They claim that the characteristics of females have changed and that organizations have changed; this alteration seems to be working in favor of females as leaders. Perhaps females in the Georgia FFA Association have evolved into confident, courageous, competent, and contagious leaders, and perhaps the FFA has become an organization more accepting of transformational leadership operations.

### **Recommendations**

Objective One - Describe FFA members attending the Success Conference in Georgia

Leadership workshop designers in Georgia and other states may not need to worry about meticulously developing differentiated age-appropriate leadership curricula for students between the ages of 16 and 18. Perhaps age appropriate curricula should be reserved for those age groups in which there are more pronounced differences.

Although the majority of Success Conference participants were from rural Georgia, state staff and teacher educators offering leadership development opportunities should consider the needs and experiences of rural, suburban, and urban participants in program design. Conference coordinators might also consider recruiting participants from more urban areas to improve diversity among the participants. However, regardless of students’ background, all seemed to share similar leadership behaviors.

Objective 2 - Describe the leadership practices of FFA members attending the Success Conference

Since participants scored lower than expected on *encouraging the heart* (45<sup>th</sup> percentile) and *enabling others to act* (35<sup>th</sup> percentile), future leadership development opportunities should focus on activities that foster collaboration, strengthen others, recognize the contributions of others, and celebrate team

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accomplishments. To develop students' ability to encourage the heart, perhaps agriculture teachers should encourage FFA members and agricultural education students to try some of the following activities suggested by Kouzes and Posner (1998, p. 67).

- Wander around ... [the agriculture classroom] ... for the express purpose of finding someone in the act of doing something that exemplifies the organization's [FFA] standards. Find a way to celebrate that person on the spot.
- Plan a festive celebration for each small milestone your team [FFA officer team] reaches.
- Tell a public story about a person in your organization who went above and beyond the call of duty.
- Ask your teammates to help design a reward and recognition system for your organization.
- Give people tools they can use to recognize one another, such as index cards or notepads printed with the message "You made my day" or "You are a hero."
- Say 'thank you' when you appreciate something that someone has done.
- Write at least three thank you notes each week.
- Ask people in your organization how and when they like to be recognized. Create a list with this information and distribute this throughout the organization.

Kouzes and Posner (1998, p. 65) also list several suggestions that leaders [agricultural education instructors] can implement for improving the leadership behavior of *enabling others to act*.

- Find ways to increase interaction among people in your organization [FFA Chapter] who need to work more effectively together.
- Establish easily accessible meeting areas that encourage people to interact.
- Assign important tasks to others. Don't always hog the limelight. Let someone else make a key presentation. Coach and support that person.
- Ask for volunteers. Give people choices. You build commitment when people don't feel forced into taking action. You build motivation when people feel like they're in control.
- Interview an athletic coach. Ask how you might apply the coach's methods in your organization. What does it mean to "coach"?
- Mentor new members in your organization [FFA Chapter]. Pair experienced leaders with emerging leaders.

Future research should further examine the factors that influence leadership. Specifically, further study should determine what experiences Georgia FFA members who participated in the Success Conference received that allowed them to be more likely to *inspire a shared vision, model the way, or challenge the process*.

Objective Three - Compare leadership practices based on participant demographics

Perhaps the most important finding of this study is the consistently higher LPI scores of females versus males. Continued analysis of the apparent leadership differences between males and females in agricultural education and the National FFA Organization is also recommended. Future studies should determine if the recent rise in female leaders can be attributed to changes in the females themselves or with agricultural education and the National FFA Organization. Future studies should also determine if the leadership-gender difference is happening with young women in other leadership education organizations.

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## **Biography**

John Ricketts is in his fifth year as an assistant professor at the University of Georgia. He is a graduate of the University of Florida and Middle Tennessee State University. In addition to coordinating the agricultural teacher education program he also teaches graduate courses for UGA's Master of Agricultural Leadership program and undergraduate courses such as Leadership and Service and Freshman Seminar in Leadership Development.

Kerry Priest is a second year graduate student and teaching assistant in agricultural leadership, education and communication at the University of Georgia. A graduate of Kansas State University, Kerry has worked for John C. Maxwell's leadership organization, Injoy, since 2002. She currently serves as an editor and consultant for two of Injoy's leadership brands, Catalyst and Life@Work.

Ben Lastly is the Executive FFA Secretary for the Georgia FFA Association. He is a graduate of Oklahoma State University and the University of Georgia. In his current role as Executive Secretary he directs leadership education and development opportunities for all members of the Georgia FFA Association.