

## WHAT DOES INDUSTRY REALLY WANT?

### Understanding the Desirable Follower Characteristics for Entry Level Positions in Agriculture

#### Abstract

The agricultural industry is demanding a skilled workforce. Leadership is often identified as a desired employability skill but understanding the relationship between leader and follower during the leadership process in agricultural contexts is limited. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how employers contextualize the follower characteristics and skills desired when hiring individuals with an undergraduate agricultural degree for entry-level positions using a case study approach. Data collected from individual interviews, a focus group, observation, and artifacts were combined to triangulate emergent findings. When viewed through the lens of followership theory, the agricultural industry seeks graduates who are independently-directed followers. The themes of job skills, organizational skills, and values component describe the desired characteristics and behaviors of independently-directed followers.

#### Introduction

An underlying goal for leadership educators is to develop future leaders in business and organizations. The agricultural industry in particular is demanding a skilled workforce with strong leadership and management competencies. Agricultural employers expect almost 60,000 openings annually between 2015 and 2020, with over half estimated to be management and business opportunities for new graduates (Goecker et al., 2015). A challenge of undergraduate agricultural programs is preparing graduates entering the agricultural workforce with solid academic knowledge, technical skills, and leadership abilities to meet the employment needs of the industry. Employers and university administrators often look to agricultural leadership education programs to meet undergraduate students in colleges of agriculture leadership development needs (Weeks & Weeks,

2006).

Although a variety of employability skills sought by agricultural employers are identified in literature, research has yet to specify exactly how these skills translate to behaviors within the agricultural workforce context. Leadership is often identified as a desired employability skill but understanding the leader and follower relationship during the leadership process in agricultural contexts is limited. Viewing desired college graduate skills as effective follower characteristics and behaviors within the context of the agricultural workforce has not been considered. Followership—the study of individuals with less ability to exert influential power, often identifiable by roles and behaviors within organizations (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014)—may help clarify the relationship between agricultural followers and leaders. In this study, follower refers to newly hired employees with

undergraduate agricultural degrees. It is postulated agricultural employer's contextualization of follower characteristics and skills desired when hiring graduates may not align with theoretical concepts of followership taught in undergraduate agricultural leadership education curriculum.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand how employers contextualize the follower characteristics and skills desired for hiring graduates with an undergraduate agricultural degree to inform agricultural leadership education curriculum. The following research question guided the investigation: What are the experiences of employers who have hired graduates with an undergraduate agricultural degree? To gain deeper understanding of employers' conceptions of desired follower characteristics and skills, I sought to describe how the skills needed by new hires with undergraduate agricultural degrees are understood, how those skills are exercised in the hired positions within their company, and, more specifically, how the skills transferred into the workspace. I wanted to know whether the conceptualizations of theoretical followership characteristics and skills taught through the agricultural leadership education program are consistent with the conceptualizations and expectations of the industry. Approval for the study was provided by the Oklahoma State University (OSU) Institutional Review Board (Application No. AG-18-54).

## Context of the Study

Agricultural employers of students with undergraduate agricultural degrees were identified through participation in the Ferguson College of Agriculture (FCA) career fair at OSU. The FCA career fair provides networking opportunities for students and employers and features over 50 employers

from around the globe. Recruiters from the various employers participate in the career fair to identify interested students specifically from the agricultural discipline for potential internships and full-time jobs. After meeting the recruiters at the career fair, two employers were purposively selected for interviewing. The employers chosen had a preference for hiring students with undergraduate degrees in agriculture full-time, had previously hired OSU FCA graduates, and maintained a statewide/national reputation.

Additionally, focus group participants were sought from the Oklahoma Agricultural Leadership Program (OALP). OALP develops future leaders for Oklahoma agriculture and is facilitated as a 30-person, two-year program through the OSU Department of Agricultural Economics and OSU Cooperative Extension. The program was identified as a source for focus group interview participation based on its class enrollment of prominent agricultural business leaders, who often hire students with undergraduate degrees in agriculture. Employers from the individual interviews and focus group interview represented a broad range of agricultural careers.

To gain more insight on the career and professional development experience of undergraduate students in agriculture I also observed the FCA Student Success Center (SSC). The SSC is a dedicated large academic and professional development area for students, located on the first floor of the primary FCA building on OSU's main campus. The SSC is advertised as offering many services to students, including academic coaching, guidance for getting involved on campus, career counseling, resume critiques, study space, computer and printer access, and professional development resources. Offices for the college student development coordinators are housed in the SSC, too. The SSC observation was conducted midweek during peak hours, since there is an emphasis on academic and career counseling and apparent heavy traffic during normal weekly business hours.

As an additional source of data, current online job announcements for entry-level positions and agricultural organization/company websites represented by the participants were reviewed. Employers, advisors, and university career services staff often advise undergraduate students companies put a lot of effort into defining job descriptions and qualifications; therefore, it was assumed for this study the desirable characteristics sought by employers would be highlighted and prioritized in job postings and on websites.

## Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to understand how agricultural employers contextualize the skills sought among college graduates with an undergraduate agricultural degree to describe the desired characteristics and behaviors of followers in entry level positions to inform agricultural leadership education curriculum. A review of relevant research literature in followership theory and employability skills of agricultural college graduates is provided to frame the need for this study.

Emphasis in leadership research has slowly shifted away from leader-centered perspectives to a paradigm with the positive reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers committed to a common purpose at the forefront. The suggestion of an organization's dependence on the effectiveness many followers as well as the leader has led researchers to focus more on understanding the role of followers in the leadership process. For organizations to remain relevant and successful in the 21st century, followers cannot be ignored (Northouse, 2019). Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) defined followership theory as the "characteristics, behaviors, and processes of individuals acting in relation to leaders" (p. 96) and included the constructs of followership characteristics, leader characteristics, followership and leadership behaviors, and followership outcomes. The reversing the lens theoretical framework for followership explained the constructs of the followership process by focusing

on "how followers affect leaders and organizational outcomes" (Northouse, 2019, p. 304).

Kelley's (1988) early conceptual model for the study of followership influenced the followership characteristics and behaviors constructs within the theoretical framework (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). The follower typologies identified by Kelley (1988, 1992) consisted of two behavioral dimensions: (a) independent, critical thinking - dependent, uncritical thinking, and (b) active - passive engagement. The traits and behaviors possessed by effective/exemplary followers were categorized as job skills, organizational skills, and a values component (Kelley, 1992). Followership theory posited effective/exemplary followership as a necessity for organizational success (Kelley, 1988, 1992).

To expand the conceptual theory of followership and its role in organizational success, researchers investigated the perceptions of followers in a variety of organizational settings through the lenses of the leader process approach, communication theory, and information processing theory. Implicit theories of effective followership were found to be based on follower's perception of work, professional ability, behavior and morality, relationship with manager, and overall approach (Mohamadzadeh et al., 2015). Positive followers were deemed virtuous, supportive, and an extension of the leader, with a constructive approach toward their work (Mohamadzadeh et al., 2015). Other qualities associated with effective followership included a collective orientation, independent thought, transparency, and acute self-awareness (Benson et al., 2016). However, findings did not suggest whether the identified followership qualities and characteristics were contextually bound based on situational factors within organizations or are desired at all times.

Research literature on agricultural employability skills was overwhelming descriptive and quantitative, and mainly approached through human capital development theory. Employers of college graduates generated a set of generalizable traits and characteristic throughout the research literature

over time, but the resulting set of skills lacked contextual and behavioral findings that may be easily transferred into practice for students. Studies showed the expectations between agricultural employers' desires and the skills and abilities of college graduates did not always align (Armoogum et al., 2016). Likewise, hiring practices and preferred experiences of prospective employees were not congruent with the employability competencies ranked important by agricultural employers (Harder et al., 2015). Although agricultural employers perceived a set of skills as essential to the success of their organization (Harder et al., 2015; Hasselquist & Kitchel, 2018), the connection to when those skills were most appropriate was not often made in the research findings. The perspective of college graduate as follower in the context of the agricultural industry did not appear to be investigated as well.

Leadership research in followership investigated the impact of the follower's motivations, characteristics, and behaviors to the leadership process (Kelley, 1988). Followership theory suggested success was achieved by those who identify and develop effective followers within their organizations (Kelley, 1988). Although agricultural employers have identified desired skills of college graduates for employment, the need to translate these skills contextually for developmental purposes remained. Therefore, followership theory provided a framework to understand how employability skills, or follower characteristics and behaviors, were contextualized by agricultural employers. Rather than focusing on the leader (i.e., employer) in the leadership relationship, this study sought to emphasize the role of the follower (i.e., employee) and what characteristics and behaviors are most desired for followers in entry level agricultural occupations.

## Theoretical Lens

Followership theory describes the relationship and interactions between individuals and leaders by focusing on followership characteristics, leader characteristics, followership and leadership

behaviors, and followership outcomes (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). The reversing the lens theoretical framework for followership looks at the phenomenon from the perspective of how followers influence leaders and organizations (Northouse, 2019). Kelley's (1988) early conceptual model for the study of followership influence the followership characteristics and behaviors constructs within the theoretical framework (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). The follower typologies identified by Kelley (1988, 1992) consist of two behavioral dimensions: (a) independent, critical thinking - dependent, uncritical thinking, and (b) active - passive engagement. Five followership patterns, or styles, emerged (Kelley, 1988, 1992): (a) Sheep/Passive (dependent, uncritical thinking and passive engagement); (b) Alienated Followers (independent, critical thinking and passive engagement); (c) Yes People/Conformists (dependent, uncritical thinking and active engagement); (d) Survivors/Pragmatist (shifting thinking and engagement behaviors among the dimensions); and, (e) Effective/Exemplary Followers (independent, critical thinking and active engagement). According to the model, effective/exemplary followers are self-managed, engaged, and committed to their organization and leader (Kelley, 1988).

## Statement of Subjectivity

As the instrument for this study, I recognize and address my own subjectivity within the study. As a graduate with three agricultural degrees (B.S. in Agricultural Economics and Business, M.S. in Agricultural Education, Communications, and Leadership, and Ph.D. in Agricultural Education with an emphasis in agricultural leadership education), I have attended three land-grant institutions in the United States. My career experience includes developing a four-year diversified agricultural degree program at a private, faith-based university; teaching undergraduate level plant, animal, student success, and leadership courses; and leading undergraduate agricultural program efforts at a major land-grant university in the southeastern region of the United States. My experiences interacting with

undergraduate students and employers in agriculture led to my interest in studying the employability and leadership of undergraduate agricultural students in the industry. Between my educational and career experiences, I have lived in four states and my personal background is heavily influenced by involvement in the agricultural industry. My family operates a produce trucking company in Florida, with a history connecting back to farming and cotton production in Alabama and Mississippi. I was a member of agricultural youth development organizations, 4-H and FFA, and served as a member and leader in various professional agricultural organizations during my career. I acknowledge these experiences shape the lens I interpreted the findings of this study.

## Methods

Qualitative inquiry seeks to understand how people or groups construct meaning within a particular context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015) and allowed me to understand how desired follower characteristics were conceptualized by agricultural employers. Basic interpretive qualitative methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015) provides rich and realistic views from multiple contexts to better understand the experiences under study. Although qualitative inquiry provides a holistic view of the phenomena being studied and allows for reciprocity between the researcher and participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015), its inductive nature may change from the original objectives of the study and is not easily replicable for future studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Three key characteristics define qualitative inquiry: (a) the design, (b) how data is collected, and (c) data analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The characteristics of this qualitative study are described as (a) a purposeful design, based on the selection of cases to provide rich and detailed information, (b) basic data collection through the use of interviews, focus groups, observation, and artifacts, and (c) the use of inductive analysis to find patterns, themes, and relationships among the data (Denzin & Lincoln,

2018; Merriam, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This qualitative study was conducted from the epistemological perspective of constructionism, which views “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Meaning related to the research question, and consistent with the interpretivism theoretical perspective, was created through the collective experiences of the individual agricultural participants (Crotty, 1998). Understanding the role the researcher plays as the instrument in qualitative research, my subjectivity, which operates throughout the entire research process (Peshkin, 1993), is acknowledged as an influence to the interpretive meanings of the participants.

A case study approach (Patton, 2015) was utilized to understand and describe in depth the shared perspectives of agricultural employers as they relate to the desired follower characteristics for entry-level positions in the industry and diversity in the workplace. The cases, in terms of this study, are the socially constructed meanings of follower characteristics and diversity among agricultural employers. Data from the case studies were coded during and after collection to discover patterns and meanings (Saldaña, 2016). The emergent patterned codes influenced the development of categories and overarching themes to describe the essence of the data (Saldaña, 2016).

Data were collected through individual interviews, a focus group interview, observation of the SSC, and review of relevant artifacts. Participants for the individual interviews and focus group interview were recruited by email and notified of the purpose of the study. Informed consent was provided at the time of the interviews. All methods of data collection were completed between September and November 2018. The individual interviews and focus group interview were conducted with two and five participants, respectfully. Morse (2000) suggests using the

consideration of the following factors to determine sample size in qualitative research: (a) the quality of data, (b) the scope of the study, (c) the nature of the topic, (d) the amount of data obtained from each participant, (e) the number of interviews with each participant, (f) the use of shadowed data, and (g) the qualitative study design. It was determined after initial review of the qualitative data, consideration of the study's scope, the ease at which information was obtained during the interview (nature of the topic), and the study's design utilizing multiple data collection methods (Morse, 2000) that saturation was met and the sample size was justified.

Both methods of interview were included to better understand the study phenomenon, as individual interviews allow for deep understanding of a topic from a particular viewpoint and focus groups allow for the opinions and beliefs about a topic to be examined broadly through interaction among participants (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). The individual interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to 75 minutes. The focus group was 80 minutes in length. Interviews were recorded using a cell phone device and the Temi application. Initial transcriptions were downloaded from the Temi application, reviewed for accuracy with the audio, and combined with field notes to reflect nonverbal communication and context. To capture power dynamics and provide more meaning to the conversation, denaturalized transcriptions were used (Oliver et al., 2005). Involuntary vocalizations, response tokens, and non-verbal vocalizations (Oliver et al., 2005) were included in the transcriptions to assist in the analysis process by providing more deep understanding of the conversation. Grammar, pronunciation slang, accents, and diction (Oliver et al., 2005) were edited to maintain confidentiality of the participants.

The participants for this study were employers and employees representing agriculture broadly and hold a variety of professions in the agricultural industry. Participants were purposively recruited to represent the diverse viewpoints and demographics of the agricultural industry in Oklahoma, with experience hiring and working alongside recent graduates

with an undergraduate degree in agriculture. Demographics such as age, experience, gender, and race were considered when reaching out to potential participants to ensure a heterogeneous group of participants. A brief description of each participant is provided (actual participant names are replaced with pseudonyms).

Mark is a White male in his mid-sixties and is the branch manager for an area agricultural credit organization. Mark has worked in agricultural lending for 40 years and is responsible for hiring new full-time employees and college students for the branch's summer internship program.

Howard, a White male in his late fifties, is the producer relations director for a prominent agricultural research and outreach entity. In this role, Howard oversees all consultant activities and producer relationships, while also managing the hiring process and formal internship program.

Jacob, a 28-year-old White male is the agronomy manager for a farmers cooperative. Originally from out of state, Jacob has lived in Oklahoma for five years and works closely with newly hired technicians, farmers, and sales people.

Sarah is a White female communications specialist and at 25 years old, the most recently hired individual among the participants. With an undergraduate double-major degree in agricultural communications and animal sciences, she has worked for more than two years for a livestock producer organization in Oklahoma.

Brittany, a 29-year-old Black female, is the agricultural communications specialist at a land-grant university and founder of a local non-profit focused on agricultural literacy among minority groups. Holding a master's degree in agricultural communications, she also

advises her campus' MANRRS (Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences) chapter and has worked in agriculture for four years.

Jeremy, a White male who had just turned 40, is a crop protection area business manager for an international agricultural science corporation and has the most agriculture experience, with over 20 years under his belt. His professional experience spans agriculture and pharmaceutical sales, with a family background in dairy as well.

David, a White male in his late thirties, is a mushroom grower in Oklahoma and has worked in the agriculture industry for 10 years. Before farming, David was a former high school agricultural education teacher.

Additional data were collected through observation and the review of artifacts to understand the research question from a variety of perspectives. The observation of the SSC was conducted for two hours midweek during peak hours. Detailed field notes reflecting the SSC layout, visible resources, and student interactions were made during and immediately following the observation. Seven artifacts in the form of current online job announcements for entry-level positions and agricultural organization/company websites represented by the participants were included as well because they allow the opportunity to confirm the data gathered through the individual and focus group interviews. As an unobtrusive measure to study human behavior (Esterberg, 2002), artifacts gave more insight into what exactly agricultural employers are looking for when hiring for new positions.

Transcriptions and field notes from the interviews were coded and analyzed immediately following data collection. Next, observation field notes and artifacts were analyzed for emerging codes. Codes from all data sources were then combined to allow for further analysis of findings pertaining to the research question.

Basic interpretive qualitative methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015), which seeks to make meaning of individuals' experiences through an inductive process (Merriam, 2002), was followed to identify the common themes and patterns. Inductive analysis was utilized to search for patterns and themes without preconceived analytical categories (Patton, 2015). Initially, pre-codes were created by "circling, highlighting, bolding, underlining, or coloring rich and significant participant quotes" that stuck out to me (Saldaña, 2016, p. 20). In Vivo codes were used as the first cycle coding method to reflect the language used by the participants (Saldaña, 2016). Analytic memos were kept during interpretation of the codes and reflected upon to guide the systematic linking of categories, properties, and dimensions (Saldaña, 2016). Resulting codes were grouped together to form meanings and explanations (Saldaña, 2016) based on convergence and divergence principles (Patton, 2015).

The credibility of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) requires "systematic in-depth fieldwork that yields high-quality data, systematic and conscientious analysis of data, credibility of the inquirer, and the readers' and users' philosophical belief in the value of qualitative inquiry" (Patton, 2015, p. 653). I was sure to analyze negative or disconfirming evidence to acknowledge potential biases and reviewed the data for broader understanding (Patton, 2015). Dependability, another important aspect of trustworthiness, is verification that findings are consistent (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). To ensure dependability, transcription data that elucidates the findings is provided to allow readers to see how I arrived at interpretations and conclusions.

Triangulation processes enhance trustworthiness of qualitative studies by overcoming potential biases, reducing methodological errors, and providing more perspectives around a phenomenon for analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). For this study, I used two methods of triangulation: triangulation of qualitative data resources and analyst triangulation (Patton, 2015). Triangulation of qualitative data resources involved "comparing and cross-checking

the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means from interviews, observations, and documents” (Patton, 2015, p. 662). Data from collected individual interviews, the focus group, observation, and artifacts were combined to triangulate emergent findings consistent with the research questions. To help reduce potential bias from my role as principal investigator, a research team helped with data collection and analysis. The research team reviewed the initial coding, compared findings from the data, and arrived at a consensus on meanings and understandings resulting from the inquiry.

Consistent with IRB-approved protocol for this study, informed consent was provided by the participants at two points: initially during the reply and agreement to participate and secondly through a signed informed consent form provided during the interview. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms to represent participants in reported findings and the exclusion of sensitive or identifiable information. A copy of the interview transcriptions was provided to participants for both reciprocity and member-check purposes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015).

Limitations of this qualitative inquiry are acknowledged. Transferability of the findings to similar contexts may be determined by the reader. Given the small sample of participants and their reflected experiences, the internal transferability of this study's findings to all workplaces in agriculture may be limited. Additionally, participants may have felt reluctant to speak freely during the interviews and focus groups due to the possibility of unanticipated dynamics between the researcher and participants. Researcher bias, although addressed in the statement of subjectivity, along with distorted participant responses, remains a potential limitation of this study (Patton, 2015).

## Findings

This study revealed an emphasis on the follower

(i.e., employee) traits and behaviors most desired for entry level positions in the agricultural sector. When viewed through the lens of followership theory and Kelley's (1988, 1992) behavioral dimensions, the agricultural industry seeks agricultural graduates who are effective/exemplary followers (i.e., those who will actively engage in the hired positions and are independent, critical thinkers). Upon closer inspection, however, graduates are only expected to have mid-level independence/critical thinking, suggesting the most effective follower sought may be considered independently directed. The themes of job skills, organizational skills, and values component emerged and align with theory to describe the desired characteristics and behaviors of agricultural graduates as independently-directed followers.

### The Independently-Directed Follower

Independently-directed followers in entry-level agriculture occupations are expected to possess a repertoire of skills and abilities beyond an earned undergraduate degree in agriculture. Many agricultural employers truly desire a diverse skillset. In referring to the most desired skills sought when hiring new employees, Howard, the public relations director for a prominent agricultural research and outreach entity stated: “What’s the intangible that I can’t just get out there and get anywhere? What gives me something that I don’t already have?” (personal communication, October 24, 2018). The intangibles, or unique skills, that the agricultural industry is looking for in new hires are categorized as job skills, organizational skills, and a values component, which encompass the industry's characterization of an independently-directed follower.

**Job skills.** Job skills of independently-directed followers are defined as characteristics and behaviors adding value to an organization (Kelley, 1992) through focus and commitment, competence in critical path activities, and initiative to increase personal value. The agricultural industry desires to hire graduates with degrees in agriculture who possess skillsets adding value to their organization. An independently-directed follower in agriculture has developed a

strong sense of resiliency and work ethic. Mark, the manager for an area agricultural credit agency, advises students by stating, "Don't be afraid to make a mistake (...) but go ahead and fail. The world's not gonna (sic) end" (personal communications, October 15, 2018). He goes on to explain in the hiring process he "wants to see what it's like after you've picked yourself back up (...) but I look for that dirt, and those bandages. Scars" (personal communications, October 15, 2018). Participants from the focus group echoed this sentiment with the need for a strong work ethic and the willingness to do more than is asked or expected.

In describing the independently-directed follower behaviors of entry level agricultural workers, the need for competence in a variety of areas was apparent. Employability skills such as attention to detail, the ability to prioritize time and balance work-related responsibilities, and adapt to change were not only represented in the job descriptions of positions within the agricultural companies but voiced numerous times by the participants. As Howard put it, "I expect them to be smart. I expect them to know their stuff" (personal communications, October 24, 2018). It was recognized by one focus group participant, Jacob, the agronomist, the industry "[has] a smaller pool that actually knows what ag is" (personal communications, October 24, 2018) when referring to potential candidates for hire and what could set certain applicants apart from each other.

When it came to increasing the scope of the organization's goals and championing new ideas, the agricultural industry desires independently-directed followers to be open to new experiences, solve problems holistically, show initiative, work independently, and be comfortable with a certain level of ambiguity on the job. Sarah, the communications specialist, explained this expectation best with a description of her first few months on the job with her new boss:

When I started I would always go ask him all these questions that probably I could figure out myself, but I was so focused on wanting to the job perfect that I would

go ask him about everything and tell him when I was doing it. And after, I kind of read that annoyed him and he didn't like that. (personal communications, October 24, 2018).

Independently-directed followers, although often described as self-starters, were also expected to behave in a contradictory manner by taking direction and following outlined company policies and procedures. Those being hired for entry level positions must earn their stripes to some extent before their expertise garners respect. Mark voiced his hesitation about followers not willing to take direction from leaders within the organization when describing a troubling new hire: "They want to be a fixer, but it's a new hire. Why? [They hadn't] demonstrated that fixer ability yet" (personal communications, October 15, 2018).

Organizational skills. The ability to develop, grow, and leverage relationships is an integral component in entry-level agricultural jobs and defines the organizational skills of an independently-directed follower (Kelley, 1992). As Howard emphasized, "We are in the relationship business" (personal communications, October 24, 2018). The desire for followers to work well within teams and communicate effectively was repeated through interviews and focus group. In addition to an acquired understanding of workplace culture, strong oral, written, and interpersonal communication skills (artifact) is essential to an agricultural graduate's success.

Professional development was highly valued by the participants in this study. Evidence of mentors, professional networking, internships, employment, and leadership experiences were commonly viewed as must-haves for graduates with an agricultural degree expecting to obtain entry-level positions in the industry. However, an observation of FCA's SSC revealed it was an unused professional development resource for college students. The SSC strives to connect undergraduate students with the agricultural industry and provide career development. Yet, students' use of the center did not appear to be

optimized for professional development purposes.

Participants' conversation often turned to diversity and the need for independently-directed followers to possess a diverse mindset when discussing relationships within the agricultural industry. Skills in diversity were somewhat difficult for participants to conceptualize but recognized as desirable for graduates seeking entry-level positions in agriculture. The participants attempted to identify complex gender, generational, and cultural diversity issues in the industry, however, they tended to beat around the bush and avoid directly identifying problems. The participants' conversation demonstrated a strong need for independently-directed followers who can address underlying biases with "compassion and empathy for other people" (Howard, personal communications, October 24, 2018).

Values component. Independently-directed followers often exhibit a value-based conscience, which intuitively guides job activities and relationships (Kelley, 1992). For employers in the agricultural industry, this values component is vital requirement for followers seeking entry-level positions. "We talk a lot about ethics on the standard of conduct side," said Mark (personal communications, October 15, 2018). Howard even explained how he interviews applicants looking specifically for values: "If through the conversation it were blatantly obvious, they didn't have a certain moral integrity that I was looking [then] they weren't going to make it" (personal communications, October 24, 2018). The values often described as integral to the industry were described as family-based, rooted in Christian faith and "old school manners" (Howard, personal communications, October 24, 2018).

## Discussion/Recommendations/ Conclusions

Understanding how the agricultural industry describes independently-directed follower characteristics and behaviors allows colleges to reverse the lens (Northouse, 2019) to view how new hires affect leaders and organizational outcomes. This

new insight may assist undergraduate agricultural leadership programs, often looked to by employers to meet the leadership development needs of students (Weeks & Weeks, 2006), in creating comprehensive followership development strategies to improve the transition of graduates into the agricultural workforce. It was postulated agricultural employer's contextualization of follower characteristics and skills desired for hiring graduates with an undergraduate degree may not align with the theoretical concepts of followership taught in agricultural leadership education curriculum. The findings of this study appear to support this hypothesis.

Findings from this study revealed agricultural employers desired new hires to work in an independently-directed manner, suggesting less critical thinking than discussed in literature but a high amount of initiative and autonomy. This finding is similar to Mohamadzadeh et al.'s (2015) description of a positive follower as an extension of the leader. The independently-directed follower, as conceptualized by the study's participants, also supports other studies showing expectations between agricultural employers' desires, hiring practices, and the skills and abilities of colleges graduates may not always be congruent (Armoogum et al., 2016; Harder et al., 2015; Hasselquist & Kitchel, 2018). Further research should seek to determine how undergraduate agricultural leadership programs can continue to develop students' critical thinking abilities while also helping them understand workplace culture, expectations regarding follower/leader relationships, and cooperation with authority.

The lack of diversity skills in the agricultural workforce was a contingent finding emerging from this study. While interpreting the relative qualitative data, it was important to note of the seven participants, six self-identified as racially White and five self-identified as male. The limited racial and gender diversity among participants were reflective of the agricultural industry demographics in the United States, and particularly the state of Oklahoma, which is historically predominately White and male. Although discussed as one of several skills/behaviors/characteristics

desired for new hires, the topic of diversity in the industry prompted a separate critical inquiry into its complexity because of the difficulty it appeared participants faced in identifying and discussing diversity issues. Future research should focus on describing the complexities behind perceived gender, generational, and cultural diversity issues in the agricultural industry, identifying and removing implicit biases to establish a multicultural and inclusive mindset in the workforce. A deeper understanding of diversity issues at the local agricultural industry level and how the current workforce addresses the issues would provide agricultural leadership education programs direction to better prepare agricultural leaders for the 21st century workforce. The first step toward achieving this, however, requires identifying and naming specific diversity issues.

Implications for practice among leadership educators also emerged as a result of this study. It is worth asking if understanding and conceptualizations of theories and concepts taught are congruent with future employers, as leadership educators consider curriculum. How might the reality of entry-level positions differ from the leadership perspectives we present to students? Findings suggest leadership educators should continue to consider the future contexts students will be engaged as we teach leadership theory and concepts in colleges of agriculture (Weeks & Weeks, 2006). Many students graduating with an undergraduate degree may not immediately move into leadership or management positions (Armoogum et al., 2016), placing them in a follower role within the organization.

Therefore, it is vital followership theory continue to be integrated and taught in leadership education curriculum at the undergraduate level. In doing so, followership theory provides leadership educators the opportunity to discuss with students the realistic tension between critical thinking and authority in the workplace. Additionally, the incorporation of internship requirements in leadership education curriculum can provide students the opportunity to learn and observe from on-the-job experience the realities of workplace expectations for new hires.

As the results of this study describe through the independently-directed follower, the level of critical thinking expected by authority or supervisors on the job may differ based on the employee's role within the organization and shift overtime (Kelley, 1988, 1992; Harder et al., 2015; Hasselquist & Kitchel, 2018; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). It is important to have these conversations and provide experiential learning opportunities in leadership education so students may consider the balance of both being a good leader and a good follower in the workforce.

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