

What a Degree in Agricultural Leadership Really Means: Exploring Student Conceptualizations

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While the leadership component has been proven to be beneficial to agricultural education departments and they attract a wide variety of students, the notion that leadership is taught within a department of agricultural education still seems to be puzzling to some people. The purpose of this study was to explore how students pursuing a degree in Agricultural Leadership and Development at Texas A&M University have constructed knowledge about their degree. Students (n = 85) enrolled in a one-hour introductory course for Agricultural Leadership and Development majors reflected on their understanding of their degree program which resulted in three themes: what it is, what they will get out of it, and how they will use it. Students reported their degree in leadership would offer them many benefits including tools to be successful both professionally and personally, and prepare them for a variety of careers both within and outside the agricultural industry. Knowing students' perceptions of their leadership degree is a step in the right direction to making sure we are creating the image we want to have of our degree programs and are correctly conveying the importance of soft skills in the 21st century workplace.

Keywords: leadership education; agricultural leadership; undergraduate education; student perceptions

Students have reported the number one concern of choosing a college to attend is the ability to obtain a good paying job after graduation (Twenge, 2006). Students are also in search of programs which have interactive, practical courses with personal attention and mentoring opportunities. Also noted is students want clear goals, high structure, and expectations (Twenge, 2006). Agricultural education programs across the country may very well meet these expectations.

In the 1993 American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) Annual Meeting Distinguished Lecture, L. H. Newcomb shared, "You, as agricultural educators, have 'within you' the very stuff which is needed to transform agricultural education departments in the universities into what they must be now and in the future" (p. 10). However, Newcomb went on to note, "Agricultural education units at the university must make a number of key changes if they are going to prosper" (p. 3-4). One of the needed changes was broadened programs. Newcomb (1993) went on to identify leadership programs as an area of opportunity when

broadening programs. "No area of the campus is better equipped to meet this need than agricultural education departments" (Newcomb, 1993, p.5).

Most of the distinguished agricultural education programs within colleges of agriculture now incorporate additional programs of study related to many of the areas Newcomb discussed, including extension, leadership, and communication (Birkenholz & Simonsen, 2011). Such findings led Birkenholz and Simonsen (2011) to conclude "agricultural education programs should consider the potential and need for including teacher education, leadership, communication, and extension in the department that administers the agricultural education program, which reflect the scope of most of the distinguished programs" (p. 24). Doerfert (2011) recently noted,

While it's useful for learners to have a solid foundation in factual knowledge, the skills needed to be successful in the 21st century workforce are much more complex. Today's employees must be able to communicate effectively, work

in teams, and develop creative solutions to complex problems while synthesizing a large and ever-changing base of information. (p. 21)

While many of the courses of study in departments of agricultural education lead to specific career fields, those in leadership tend to be broader and offer students a wide variety of career options following graduation.

Leadership is not easy to define. Just as with the human race, its definition is unique, differing from gender and background, culture and country. "There are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept" (Bass, 1990, p. 11). Komives, Lucas, and McMahon (2007) expanded upon this and concluded, "leadership cannot be touched, smelled, tasted, but it can be understood by how it is seen, heard, thought, and felt. Leadership is, therefore, a socially constructed phenomenon" (p. 22).

No matter the debate over a common definition, the leadership discipline serves a common good. Huber (2002) shared, "the purpose of leadership education is to prepare people (and organizations) to be responsible, together, in an increasingly interdependent world" (p. 27). People are given opportunities to lead; it is how people seize these opportunities that can potentially make a positive or negative impact on others. When justifying reasons to study leadership, Jackson and Parry (2011) shared,

Leadership is widely seen as both the problem and solution to all manner of contemporary issues: from ending world poverty to addressing global warming; from turning around ailing corporations to regenerating local communities; from reviving schools to creating scientific breakthroughs. The hunger and quest for leadership knowledge appear to be insatiable. (p. 8)

Using a pile-sort cluster analysis, Crawford, Lang, Fink, Dalton, and Fielitz (2011) identified seven important soft skill clusters "needed for successful transition from completion of baccalaureate degrees to competitive employment in agriculture, natural resources and related careers" (p. 1) including: (1) experience, (2) team skills, (3) communication skills, (4)

leadership skills, (5) decision making/problem solving skills, (6) self-management skills, and (7) professionalism skills. After identifying the soft skill clusters, Crawford et al. then surveyed 8,111 students, faculty, alumni, and employers from 31 universities and 282 employers and found "soft skills are ranked most important by employers and alum, while discipline knowledge is ranked most important by faculty and students" and "students are more optimistic about their preparedness in the soft skills than faculty, alum or employers" (p. 10). One employer who participated in the study had this to say,

Leadership and its associated skills come with watching industry role models, though project leadership can start at the entry level. Overall, good "people skills" are a cost of entry. Poor people skills are a death knell, as companies of all sizes are too busy to take people aside to teach them. (Crawford, Lang, Fink, Dalton, & Fielitz, 2011, p. 18)

Thus, leadership education serves to teach people how to best seize opportunities according to their individual career aspirations and personal strengths. Some lead more naturally than others, but essentially anyone can learn leadership and develop leadership skills (Komives, Dugan, Owen, Slack, Wagner, & Associates, 2011). It is a degree of pure volunteerism, a true desire to better oneself and the ever changing countries of our world. "Leadership has a harder job to do than just choose sides. It must bring them together" (Kouzes & Posner, 2008, p. 36).

In the preface to their 2005 book, Crawford, Brungardt, and Maughan noted, "the academic study of leadership has boomed over the last decade" (p. ix). In 2003, Riggio, Ciulla, and Sorenson noted that there were approximately 1,000 leader development programs offered at higher education institutions in the United States. However, according to the authors, "relatively few of these programs are curricular-based undergraduate programs offering academic credit in the form of a bachelor's degree, academic minor, or certificate" (Riggio, Ciulla, & Sorenson, 2003, p. 223). Yet, "transforming leadership from a single course here and there into a discipline is a necessity, many educators argue" (Bisoux, 2002, p. 28). Today, under-

graduate and graduate degree programs in leadership “aim to respond directly to the demands of employees, parents and students who are looking for a competitive edge when they move into the job market” (Jackson & Parry, 2011, p. 9). “Already students from institutions that offer degree programs in leadership are in demand” (Bisoux, 2002, p. 26).

The offering of leadership degrees in departments of agricultural education is not a completely new phenomenon. In fact, the leadership component of agricultural education programs grew out of a need to teach and train students to advise youth organizations such as FFA and 4-H (Fritz et al., 2003). Newcomb (1993), shared, “A persuasive argument can be made to center all such leadership efforts in an academic department. I believe the department of choice is agricultural education” (p. 5). Though the current number of agricultural education departments offering degrees in leadership is not known, results of a study by Fritz and Brown (1998) conducted more than a decade ago indicated 68% of agricultural education departments were offering leadership courses and 49% of agricultural education departments planned to expand their leadership course offerings. Fritz, Hoover, Weeks, Townsend, and Carter (2001) and Fritz et al. (2003) cited lack of resources as the primary reason for agricultural education departments not offering leadership and human resource management/development courses.

Courses in leadership attract a large variety of students both within and outside colleges of agriculture (Brown & Fritz, 1994; Fritz, Hoover, Weeks, Townsend, & Carter, 2001; Fritz et al., 2003). The addition of a leadership component to degrees and course offerings in departments of agricultural education has proven to be beneficial (Fritz & Brown, 1998). Guidelines and frameworks in terms of program objectives, courses offered, resources needed, internship objectives, and career paths are starting to be established for quality agricultural leadership degree programs (Morgan, Rudd, & Kaufman, 2004). However, “Agricultural leadership course offerings across the country show little consistency of courses offered, content within courses, or texts used” (Morgan et al., 2004, p. 1). Experts in a Delphi study

conducted by Morgan, Rudd, and Kaufman (2004) identified eight courses, including an introduction to leadership theory and practice course, to be included in an undergraduate agricultural leadership program. Wren (1994) noted, “The initial task of an introductory course on leadership is to introduce the student to the notion of ‘leadership’. Most students have at best a vague (and often simplistic) idea of what it is they are about to study” (p. 77). Wren (1994) discussed the importance of students becoming comfortable with leadership in the introductory course so “that the student realizes that leadership is not some metaphysical notion, but instead a human process that can be studied, understood, and – hopefully – applied to real-life situations” (p. 75). Similarly, Haber (2012) noted “students’ understandings of leadership could influence their motivation for participating in leadership programs or for seeking out leadership experiences during college and post-college” (p. 27).

While the leadership component has been proven to be beneficial to agricultural education departments and they attract a wide variety of students, the notion that leadership is taught within a department of agricultural education still seems to be puzzling to some people. Advisors and professors are often asked what a leadership degree is doing in an agricultural college. However, the development of agricultural leaders is a component of the mission statement of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (COALS) at Texas A&M University. More specifically, “the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences fosters a stimulating educational environment that expands knowledge through discovery research and engages students in innovative learning experiences which empower them to serve and lead in our increasingly global society” (College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, 2010, p. 2). Furthermore, “institutions must seek to develop leadership capacity in all students” (Komives et al., 2011, p. xvi).

The fourth priority area of the 2011-2015 National Research Agenda (Doerfert, 2011) focuses on meaningful, engaged learning in all environments. The key outcome of this priority area states, “learners in all agricultural education learning environments will be actively and

emotionally engaged in learning, leading to high levels of achievement, life and career readiness, and professional success” (Doerfert, 2011, p. 21). To accomplish this outcome, learners, teachers, and environmental outcomes should be studied (Doerfert, 2011). Leadership education is a social science and an art in which understanding the perceptions of its students related to the overall program is crucial in order to successfully prepare 21st century graduates. The “intentional design and assessment of student leadership programs is critical” (Komives et al., 2011, p. xvi). Citing the work of Boatman, Owen (2011) noted “Boatman further asserted that leadership assessment creates important self-awareness in students that ‘helps self-understanding and strengthens the ability to develop individual goals and commit to future growth experiences’” (p. 180).

In a national panel report, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU, 2002) called for college students to become intentional learners that are both purposeful and self-directed. “Becoming such an intentional learner means developing self-awareness about the reason for study, the learning process itself, and how education is used” (AACU, 2002, p. 21). Similarly, one employer in the Crawford et al. (2011) study stated when asked about the most important thing students are not learning in college, “there is a need to communicate findings to people who do not know anything about what you’re doing – so this is an area of teaching the audience” (p. 21). Leadership educators must ensure that students enrolled in leadership degree programs understand their area of study so they can effectively communicate with others about their degree. Thus, it is important to assess the student conceptualizations of their leadership degree from an agricultural education department. In other words, leadership educators must ask questions related to whether or not students recognize leadership degrees within agricultural education departments as beneficial to their development as 21st century agricultural leaders and if students can accurately describe their degree to others. However, the literature related to students’ conceptualization of their degree in agricultural leadership is arguably thin.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is rooted in constructivist learning theory. Over the years, several learning theories have attempted to explain how students learn. According to Schunk (2000), “behavioral theories view learning as a change in the form or frequency of behavior” while “cognitive theories stress the mental organization of knowledge and the propositional networks of information and production systems” (pp. 23-24). Constructivist learning theories, however, posit that “learners take in information and cognitively process it in ways that reflect their needs, dispositions, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings” (Schunk, pp. 23-24). “Thus, in sum, human knowledge – whether it be the bodies of public knowledge known as the various disciplines, or the cognitive structures of individual knowers or learners – is *constructed*” (Phillips, 1995, p. 5).

Citing Bruning, Schraw, and Roning (1995), Schunk (2000) noted, “constructivism is a psychological and philosophical perspective contending that individuals form or construct much of what they learn and understand” (p. 229). Driver, Asoko, Leach, Mortimer, and Scott (1994) shared, constructivist positions posit “that knowledge is not transmitted directly from one knower to another, but is actively built up by the learner” (p. 5). Similarly, Joyce, Weil, and Calhoun (2004) noted, “the constructivist position is that knowledge is not just transmitted to the student by teachers or parents, but inevitably has to be created as the child responds to the information in the educational environment” (p. 13). In other words, learners are at the center of the learning process as they develop their own understanding of what they study (Eggen & Kauchak, 2001).

There have been significant discussions as to the meaning of constructivism (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996; Phillips, 1995). However, Duffy and Cunningham (1996) noted, “they do seem to be committed to the general view that (1) learning is an active process of constructing rather than acquiring knowledge, and (2) instruction is a process of supporting that construction rather than communicating knowledge” (p. 171). Constructivists such as Piaget and Vygotsky “have been concerned with

how the individual learner goes about the construction of knowledge in his or her own cognitive apparatus” (Phillips, 1995, p. 7).

Duffy and Cunningham (1996), based on the work of Cobb, characterized constructivists as either cognitive constructivists such as Piaget or sociocultural constructivists such as Vygotsky. A central aspect of Piaget’s view of learning is that knowledge is constructed by an individual and of concern is the process by which humans construct their knowledge of the world using cognitive schemes (Driver et al., 1994). Thus, the cognitive constructivist view “emphasizes the constructive activity of the individual as he or she tries to make sense of the world” (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996, p. 175). Vygotsky on the other hand, “emphasized the importance of social interaction with more knowledgeable others” (Cobb, 1994, p. 14). Thus, the sociocultural constructivist view “emphasizes the socially and culturally situated context of cognition” (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996, p. 175).

Some, such as Cobb (1994), view the cognitive constructivist and the sociocultural constructivist perspectives as complementary while others, such as Duffy and Cunningham (1996) do not. Haber (2012) suggested “that leadership educators must, too, seek to understand how students define leadership as they seek to enhance programs, meet the development goals of the institution, and prepare future leaders. Similarly, Wren (1994) argued that “it is critical in an introductory course in leadership that the general nature of the concept under study be understood from the very beginning” such that students understand “that leadership, for all its complexities, is at bottom a human process which can be studied and understood” (p. 79). This study emphasized the complementary nature of the cognitive constructivist view and the sociocultural constructivist perspective in an attempt to understand how students in an introductory leadership course construct knowledge of their degree program as they organized, and even reorganized, their thoughts on the discipline following interactions with course content, the course instructor, and fellow classmates in an introductory leadership course.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore how students enrolled in an introductory leadership course for students pursuing a degree in Agricultural Leadership and Development (ALED) at Texas A&M University conceptualize their degree in leadership. By examining students’ attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about their leadership degree, faculty in agricultural education programs incorporating leadership studies, can better assess their degree programs. Faculty can utilize student conceptualizations of their degree to determine if the students understand what they will be studying within their degree program and if they can, as a result, articulate the value of their degree program to others. Thus, this study was guided by the following research question, what does a degree in ALED at Texas A&M University really mean to students?

Methodology

This study utilized a basic, qualitative study approach (Merriam, 2009). The respondents for this study included all 85 undergraduates enrolled in an introductory, survey course for ALED majors. The Institutional Review Board approved the research procedures for this study. As part of the course, students were asked to read an article from the *Journal of Leadership Education* entitled *Approaching Leadership Education in the New Millennium* (Huber, 2002).

Within the article, Huber (2002) explored five key areas within leadership education: the leadership learner, the overall purpose of leadership education, the content or subject matter to be taught, the learning process, and the role of the leadership educator. After reading the article, students engaged in a class discussion about why they selected the ALED degree and what they expected to get out of their degree. Students turned in a one-page reflection paper that outlined what they believed an ALED degree really meant. These reflection papers served as the documents for analysis within this study. To ensure confidentiality, each paper was assigned a code number.

Within the qualitative research paradigm, this study used inductive content analysis. “Content analysis is a technique that enables researchers to study human behavior in an indirect way through an analysis of their communications” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 472). According to Patton (2002), “content analysis, then, involves identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns in the data” (p. 463).

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), “analysis involves working with the data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them, and searching for patterns” (p. 159). Data from the reflection papers were unitized such that only one idea was found within each unit of data (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Data were coded using first cycle and second cycle coding methods (Saldaña, 2009). During first cycle coding, all 85 reflection papers were coded individually by the researchers using open coding (Saldaña, 2009). During a peer-debriefing after open coding, the researchers closely examined their codes and compared them for similarities and identified sub-categories. Based on the sub-categories created during the open coding process, axial codes were assigned during second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2009). In order to create the big picture, the axial codes reassembled the data coded in open coding and emerged as the major themes gleaned from the documents.

According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2009), there are two common methods of interpreting content analysis data: the use of frequencies and the percentage and/or proportion of particular occurrences to total occurrences and the use of codes and themes to help organize the content and arrive at a narrative description of the findings. Both methods were employed in this study. Included in the findings are representative quotes from respondents, written in their own words, as well as frequencies and percentages of student comments within each of the themes.

To increase credibility within the study, triangulation and peer-debriefing were used. In this study, investigator triangulation was incorporated and achieved by having multiple researchers independently analyze the data and then

compare their findings (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). To increase dependability and confirmability, an audit trail was maintained and kept with each coded document (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Content analysis of the 85 student reflection papers on what a degree in ALED means revealed three overall themes: what it is, what students will get out of it, and how students will or could use the degree.

What It Is

Of the 85 student papers, 59 (69.4%) of them demonstrated an understanding of what a degree in ALED encompasses. Many of the students shared that leadership is broad, but beneficial as it allows students to develop personally as well as, professionally. One student noted, “A degree in ALED also means learning better communication skills, gaining business experience, as well as collecting knowledge about agriculture” (28). Student 36 believed, “ALED is the study of how to be a diverse, flexible and able leader in various settings” whereas student 22 felt as though “...ALED offers a wide variety of subjects that expands and challenges current knowledge and beliefs.”

Other students provided more specific definitions of what a leadership degree is. Student 45 felt as though “ALED is designed to train and create leaders the field of agriculture and industry needs to grow and further connect with the community it serves.” Other student thoughts provided that “ALED is a very hands-on major that involves talking to others, solving problems, and working with groups/teams” (63).

Personal development and the ability to apply this growth throughout their college education was a prevalent theme expressed in student papers. “To me, a degree in this particular field means a lifetime of personal growth and self-discovery” stated student 82. “It is also designed for the students who desire to take what is learned in classroom or community type setting and quickly apply it to their surrounding environment” (11).

What Students Will Get Out of It

Approximately 87.1% ($n = 74$) of the papers held student perceptions of what they will get out of holding a degree in ALED. Students shared the commonality that they will be well equipped with the tools necessary to be successful in society. This was a common idea no matter their choice in career. Student 26 stated, "...being an ALED major can assure CEO's and directors of one thing: versatility." Other students shared the idea of student 19, "...I was given the tools and opportunities to hone my special leadership qualities and find a career that went hand in hand with my passions."

Self-growth, especially confidence, was a common benefit expected by the students in the introductory class. Student 58 believes, "This degree will teach you how to become a leader who will be able to make significant changes in our fast moving society instead of just standing on the sidelines trying to figure out how to keep up." "ALED is a degree that provides students with not only the knowledge to pursue various jobs, but this degree offers life skills that prepare an individual to lead throughout day-to-day life" (3). "Being an ALED major is meaning to make change in the world for the better of others. It is about taking risk and not being afraid to do it" (38).

Students graduating with a degree in ALED felt as though they would be well prepared to teach and facilitate people within a company or organization. Student 82 stated, "I will develop my own personal methods of facilitation, and discover an effective way to teach others." Others felt that "As a student pursuing a degree in ALED, the student will learn how to work with people and how to think organizationally" (62) or as student 55 says, "To me, a degree in ALED is equivalent to having a degree in motivating, understanding, and inspiring people." Another noted,

Finally graduating with this degree you should be able to make informed decisions, be flexible and able to adjust on the fly in times of change or crisis, be able to manage people and their opinions, and be able to convert lessons learned from past experiences into everyday life. (75)

How It Will Be or Could Be Used

Almost three-quarters (71.8%, $n = 61$) of students in the introductory leadership class already had an idea of how their degree would benefit them in their future. Students plan to use their degree in two major areas of life, professionally and personally.

Students feel they can be competitive in the professional world based on their educational training in ALED. Student 72 said, "It does not entitle someone to a specific job, but rather opens numerous doors through leadership." Another stated, "With this degree, a person will be enabled to play a part in creating the innovative changes in agriculture that future generations will talk about for years to come" (34).

Some students were able to identify their chosen career while others identified careers possible within this major, but they all could see that the benefits of this degree are vast. "I believe a degree in ALED will help me achieve my goal to be a strong leader and help me pursue my future endeavors of wanting to go to law school and eventually practicing law" (30). Student 18 said, "I will be able to use this degree for the rest of my life whether that means I am serving as an officer in the Army or in a public sector of the United States." A degree in ALED will "...allow a student to succeed in any work field..." (16) thus "Many jobs are available to students such as communications/public relations, politics, lobbying for agriculture, extension work and other comparable fields" (70).

Personal gains include, "I believe that a degree in ALED means that you are willing to teach people how to be responsible and become their own leader" (69) and "Being an ALED major means helping others discover themselves, along with their strengths and weaknesses" (82). Student 31 felt, "I will be able to use this degree to teach my children integrity, initiative, and confidence and a willingness to contribute to common goals." Personal gains from this major meant as much success to students as the professional gains they are to receive.

Conclusions and Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore how students pursuing a degree in ALED at Texas A&M University conceptualize their degree. Based on the sociocultural constructivist perspective, student enrolled in a one-hour introductory leadership course constructed their understanding of their degree, in part, based upon interactions with the course instructor and fellow classmates after reading an article written by a leadership educator. Using the cognitive constructivist perspective, the focus of analysis in this study was to represent the conceptual model students have of their degree (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996).

Students in this course were prompted in constructing their view of what the degree means through reading an article about what leadership education entails and engaging in a class discussion, and therefore, may not have had many “actual” experiences in courses or interaction with others in the department. Nevertheless, the fact that students described their understanding of their degree in terms of what it is, what they will get out of it, and how they will or could use it is encouraging. It can be concluded that perhaps providing students with a context to reflect upon the components of their degree and what they should expect early on in their degree program may be a good tool for getting students focused on how to get the most out of their degree program. This supports Wren’s (1994) notion that one of the purposes of an introductory leadership course is to help students understand not only the concept of leadership, but also that it can, and will be, studied and applied throughout their degree.

Students saw the benefit of their degree program in terms of personal development and self-discovery. This is consistent with Boatman’s (as cited in Owen, 2011) and Haber’s (2012) assertion that asking students to articulate the meaning they have constructed of their degree program can help students focus on future growth experiences. Based on the work of Haber (2012), this finding would indicate that because of how students have constructed their knowledge of their degree in leadership, they may have more motivation for a lifetime of personal growth and seeking out leadership

experiences in college and beyond. However, it is recommended that future studies also look at the conceptualizations of students as they are closer to graduation and preparing to enter the workforce.

Students perceived their leadership degree to be one that is broad in nature, allows them to focus individually on their talents and strengths, and allows them to combine their knowledge of agriculture with knowledge of leadership. They seemed to embrace the concept that this degree helps them develop personally as well as professionally. Morgan et al. (2004) identified key objectives of agricultural leadership programs through a Delphi panel of agricultural leadership faculty. It was concluded that “several of the key objectives relate to developing an understanding of personal leadership strengths and weaknesses” (p. 5). In the current study, students’ perceptions related to the notion that they would develop personally and be able to apply this growth throughout their college experience.

According to the students in this study, a leadership degree means they will have the tools necessary to be successful in life. They articulated that they will gain not only leadership skills, but life skills that will enable them to work with others, teaching, facilitating, and inspiring them. “Soft skills are ranked most important by employers and alum” (Crawford et al., 2011, p. 10) in regard to skills needed by competitive employment in agriculture, natural resources and related careers. It is worth noting that students perceived they would obtain some of these soft skills through their degree in ALED. Students made mention of the following soft skills outlined in the Crawford et al. (2011) study: team skills (Student 63), communication skills (Student 28), leadership skills (Student 82, 62, 55, 58, 38), self-management skills (Student 82), and decision-making/problem solving (Student 63). Furthermore, Doerfert (2011) noted the importance of such skills in graduates entering the workforce. However, given the fact that Crawford et al. (2011) concluded that students are more confident in these sorts of skills than faculty, alumni, and employers, and that students in an introductory leadership course may have limited knowledge of soft skill, including leadership skills, requirements in the

professional world, it is recommended that future studies more explicitly explore students' level of proficiency in these skills as well as incorporate the perceptions of other stakeholder groups including faculty and employers.

Students believed this degree would equip them with the ability to compete for many different kinds of jobs and careers and ultimately would open many doors for them. This finding is consistent with Jackson and Parry's (2011) notion that students in leadership degree programs are looking for a competitive edge as they enter the job market. Some careers named included law, military, lobbyist, and extension as well as being an innovator for agriculture. Furthermore, if the number one concern of choosing a college for students is the ability to obtain a good paying job after graduation (Twenge, 2006), it appears that a degree in leadership might be able to fulfill that need. The fact that students perceive this degree to open many doors and allow them to compete for many different kinds of jobs would indicate they believe this degree can lead to a good paying job after graduation.

This study seems to forecast a very positive light on a degree in leadership from an agricultural education department. Studies should be continued which delve deeper into the perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of students in leadership majors within agricultural education departments to ensure educators are meeting the current and future needs of this population. While this study did not uncover any negative student perceptions about an agricultural leadership degree, students were not asked specifically about any negative thoughts they had about their degree. Additional studies should be conducted to assess negative perceptions students might have about the degree program.

In this era of budget cuts and a weakened economy, universities, colleges, and departments have to justify and substantiate their existence. "The mantra 'Prove your worth' is often repeated in this era of educational accountability" (Owen, 2011, p. 177). Agricultural education departments are not immune to this phenomenon. Knowing students' perceptions of their leadership degree is a step in the right direction to making sure educators are creating positive images of degree programs and to ensure leadership educators are helping students see the benefits of a degree incorporating both factual knowledge and the softer skills sought by employers.

Objectives of undergraduate agricultural leadership programs identified by Morgan et al. (2004) included integrating leadership theory with critical issues in agriculture, practicing team building skills, applying leadership theories and practice, communicating effectively, developing problem solving skills, and demonstrating the ability to empower and enable others. While looking more broadly at students pursuing degrees leading to careers in agriculture, natural resources, and related careers, and not specifically agricultural leadership students, Crawford et al. (2011) nevertheless noted the importance of similar skills. Based on the current study, students felt they would be able to gain these skills through their agricultural leadership degree. Overall, it can be concluded that the conceptualizations of students and what they think they will get out of their leadership degree from an agricultural education department does meet at least part of the image and expectations faculty have determined to be important for an undergraduate agricultural leadership program.

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