

## Urban FFA Members' Sense of the Organizational Culture of the FFA

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*Organizational culture shapes how members of a group act. The culture has the power to exclude potential new members who do not fit into the culture of the organization. Research on urban school-based agriculture programs has indicated that urban agriculture students face barriers to their participation in the National FFA Organization (FFA). Experiences of urban FFA members at a National FFA Convention can provide researchers with an understanding of how urban agriculture students view the FFA organization. The purpose of the case study was to explore how urban FFA members experienced the FFA organizational culture while attending the 2012 National FFA Convention. We followed one urban FFA chapter during the 2012 National FFA Convention and conducted interviews before, during, and after the convention. We also conducted focus group interviews and made observations. Belmont FFA members did not generally perceive their experiences at the convention as a barrier to their involvement in FFA and were generally positive toward the FFA artifacts, beliefs, and values they identified at the convention. However, these findings need to be understood in the context of the members who attended the convention as their motivation to participate in FFA may have positively influenced their views.*

Keywords: urban FFA members, organizational culture, National FFA Organization

The National FFA Organization (FFA) wants to create a more inclusive organization and engage with underrepresented students (National FFA Organization [FFA], 2014a) such as urban students. This inclusion is important because America faces numerous difficulties in feeding our population at home and around the world (FFA, 2014b). FFA leaders believe increased membership and involvement in the organization can help meet these food insecurity problems. However, recruiting urban agriculture students to be active in FFA can be challenging. This challenge may include changing urban students' negative perceptions of FFA. For instance, a survey of 540 FFA members from across the nation revealed that the image of FFA was a barrier to student participation (Hoover & Scanlon, 1991). More recent studies have complemented these findings. A case study of ten schools with more than 300 FFA members and non-members revealed non-members often referred to FFA members as *hicks*, *hillbillies*, and *farmers*. Non-members also displayed apathy toward participating in FFA activities (Phelps, Henry, & Bird, 2012). These perceptions of FFA and its members from outsiders and/or non-FFA members can create challenges for recruiting diverse students. If a student cannot identify with an organization or its members, then they might not be inclined to join or participate (Larson, 1994). Thus, the organizational culture of FFA may negatively alter how urban students think about the organization.

Organizations possess cultures that guide their members' practices (Ott, 1989). A basic definition of organizational culture is the shared values and practices of the group (Pettigrew, 1979). Organizational culture tends to be abstract, difficult to identify, and possess powerful positive and negative effects (Schein, 2010). The shared principles of the culture serve to norm

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the behaviors of the group. A well-developed organizational culture can provide stability and purpose for members (Schein, 2010). Organizational culture can also have negative influences. For example, research has indicated some working women experienced a glass ceiling in their careers because of a male-dominated organizational culture (Vianen & Fischer, 2002). Urban youth organization studies revealed if students do not perceive they belong or cannot relate to a group, then they will not participate (Larson, 1994).

Research on urban youth participation in after-school programs sheds some light on to the importance of organizational culture. Studies have highlighted how students' perceptions of their cultural fit with after-school organizations influenced their decisions to participate (Borden, Perkins, Villarruel, & Stone, 2005; Harvard Family Research Project [HFRP], 2004). For instance, researchers examined the role of organizational leaders' culture (ethnicity) in students' decision to participate. A study of the Boys and Girls Clubs of New York City and Boston revealed students gravitated toward leaders who had the same background and ethnicity (Herrera & Arbretton, 2003). Understanding the significance of organizational culture on urban youth participation is critical, considering the rural heritage of FFA (Martin & Kitchel, 2013). Likewise, understanding how urban students view the organizational culture of FFA may be important to ensuring their participation in the organization.

### **Theoretical Framework – Organizational Culture**

The culture of an organization is omnipresent. Even large global organizations with numerous regional subunits have organizational cultures filtering throughout the systems (Schein, 2010). The term culture within the phrase organizational culture has multifaceted components. First, culture manifests itself at different points in members' lives (Schein, 2010). The macroculture of an organization could guide the actions of an organization's members at the local level; however, the microculture at the local level could subvert that macroculture. For instance, the National FFA Organization encourages the agrarian traditions of the organization by requiring the FFA official dress during certain activities (Martin & Kitchel, 2013, FFA, 2014d); yet, a local FFA chapter can counter this agrarian value by not enforcing the official dress requirement with their members. Cultural distinctions, insignias and customs are important to establish identity and to convey a sense of belonging. This study examines how urban FFA members' viewed the macroculture of FFA presented at the National FFA Convention and how their impressions influenced their decisions to participate at the microculture level (i.e., in the local FFA Chapter).

Whatever the source, the culture of an organization shapes the practices of its members (Schein, 2010). Learning the practices of a group involves the socialization of members through the use of symbols, role models, and rituals (Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv, & Sanders, 1990). However, organizational culture is not easily discernible from the outside (Schein, 2010). Identifying organizational culture requires an examination of the *artifacts* and *espoused beliefs* of the group. Artifacts are the visible objects and observed behaviors of the group. The espoused values include the goals, strategies, and philosophies developed for the group. Artifacts and espoused values help define the basic underlying assumptions of the group, which represent the taken for granted beliefs of the organization (Schein, 1990). In this study, the artifacts were the different FFA events that members experienced during the convention. The espoused beliefs and values were the statements that members made about FFA before, during, and after convention.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this case study was to explore how urban FFA members experienced the organizational culture of FFA while attending the National FFA Convention. This study aligned with Priority Area #5 of the National Research Agenda (Doerfert, 2011). Three research questions guided this study:

1. How did urban members negotiate their connections (or lack thereof) to FFA before the National FFA Convention?
2. How did urban members characterize their experiences at the opening session, career expo, and workshops of the National FFA Convention?
3. How did urban members negotiate their connection (or lack thereof) to FFA after the National FFA Convention?

### **Methods**

We operated under a post-positivist epistemology for this case study. Post-positivism presupposes that theories govern the world; however, we cannot be positive about our claims of knowledge. Post-positivist research relies heavily on frameworks to guide the investigation and data analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Phillips & Burbules, 2000). The subjectivity of the researcher is important in post-positivist research. We were considered insiders to FFA as former FFA members and officers. We were also school-based teachers of agriculture and FFA advisors. This case study examined how the organizational culture influenced urban FFA members. The unit of analysis was the organizational culture of FFA as experienced by urban FFA members at the 2012 National FFA Convention. The duration of the case study and experiences of the members immediately before, during, and after the convention formed the boundaries of the case. The theory of organizational culture formed the framework for this study. Organizational culture was identified as the principle framework from a review of literature on urban and non-traditional agricultural education students and FFA members. The theory of organizational culture, as explained within this study, would help explain why some students do not identify with the National FFA Organization.

The case under investigation was bounded by the members of the Belmont FFA Chapter (pseudonym) and those members who attended the National FFA Convention. The FFA chapter at Belmont High School was purposively selected for a variety of reasons. First, the school was part of a large metropolitan school district, and the students had few ties to production agriculture and rural life. This perspective differed from the presumed values displayed at the National FFA Convention (Martin & Kitchel, 2013). Secondly, the Belmont FFA advisors routinely took 10 to 18 FFA members to the National FFA Convention. The trip to convention was one of the few FFA activities Belmont FFA members experienced beyond the local chapter. The members' unfamiliarity with FFA beyond the chapter level is important for this study. The National FFA Convention was chosen as the other boundary of this case because the convention displayed a high level of visible organizational culture. The event has been described as a celebration of FFA culture (Miner, 2003). The list of activities highlighting the organizational culture includes the convention sessions, career expo, entertainment, tens of thousands of FFA jackets, workshops, and more. No other experience could have allowed members to experience this degree and intensity of the organizational culture in a short period time.

### **Case Description**

Belmont High School was set in the center of the metropolitan area of Golden (pseudonym). Golden is located in a Midwestern state and has over 300,000 residents with the surrounding area having more than 2.5 million residents. Belmont was a magnet school serving students from every corner of Golden. The student body was racially and ethnically diverse. The Belmont student population featured 60% African-Americans, 20% Caucasian, and 20% Asian and Hispanic. The school had two agriculture teachers. Each teacher had a curriculum pathway: veterinary science and horticulture. Both teachers were Caucasian and female. The more experienced teacher, Mrs. Kroner, had been teaching at Belmont for the past five years, while the

other teacher, Ms. Hamilton, was entering her second year at Belmont. Both teachers came from predominately rural and traditional FFA programs while in high school. The student population of the agriculture program was generally representative of the school; however, this study focused only on the FFA members attending the National FFA Convention. The 15 FFA members included 14 females and one male; ten Caucasians, three African-Americans, one Hispanic, and one bi-racial member. The racial breakdown of the members attending the National FFA Convention did not closely align to the demographics of the Belmont agriculture program. They were grade classified as six juniors and nine seniors. The members were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. Table one outlines the participants of the study.

Table 1

*Characteristics of Members*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Grade</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Convention Returner</i>
Andrea	Junior	Female	Caucasian	Mrs. Kroner	No
Sally	Junior	Female	Caucasian	Mrs. Kroner	No
Caroline	Junior	Female	Caucasian	Mrs. Kroner	No
Amber	Senior	Female	Caucasian	Mrs. Kroner	No
Sara	Junior	Female	Caucasian	Mrs. Kroner	No
Lorie	Junior	Female	Caucasian	Mrs. Kroner	No
Linda	Junior	Female	African-American	Mrs. Kroner	No
Maggie	Senior	Female	Caucasian	Mrs. Kroner	Yes
Maria	Senior	Female	Caucasian	Mrs. Kroner	Yes
Beth	Senior	Female	Caucasian	Mrs. Kroner	Yes
Tami	Senior	Female	Caucasian	Mrs. Kroner	No
Yolanda	Senior	Female	African-American	Ms. Hamilton	Yes
Stephanie	Senior	Female	Bi-Racial	Mrs. Kroner	Yes
Raul	Senior	Male	Hispanic	Ms. Hamilton	Yes
Sasha	Senior	Female	African-American	Ms. Hamilton	Yes

The two teachers served as the co-advisors of the FFA chapter. Members usually had little contact with traditional agriculture; although some had experience with nontraditional agriculture topics before entering the agriculture programs such as urban pet care. Most of the FFA members in this study had participating in at least one FFA activity and no more than three activities above the chapter.

**Data Collection and Data Sources**

Data were collected during a two-month time span with four data collection sessions, which generated 14 sets of data along with researcher’s observations. These data points included: 1) interviews before the convention; 2) researcher’s observations during the convention; 3) focus groups conducted during the convention; and 4) a set of interviews within three weeks of the convention. The first data set included 15 interviews with the members three weeks before the convention. The interviews ranged from seven to fifteen minutes. We utilized a variety of introductory, probing and clarifying questions during the semi-structured interviews (Kvalve, 1996). The interview questions focused on the organizational culture of the Belmont FFA chapter and how members fit into the culture (see Appendix A for all protocols). This interview session also focused on members’ expectations prior to visiting the National FFA Convention.

The second data set was collected during the National FFA Convention as we observed members' interactions during the convention. We observed students during six time periods at the convention. The students were observed during the opening session, talent show, a workshop, and four times at the career expo. We recorded the dialogue, context, and experience of the FFA members in the field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

The five focus groups with the Belmont FFA members at the National FFA Convention formed the third data session (Krueger, 1994). The first set of two focus groups was conducted after a short first day at the convention and it lasted 15 minutes. The second set of three focus groups, conducted after the second day at the convention, lasted more than 30 minutes each. The focus group sessions began with open-ended questions about the events of the day. Probing questions were utilized to gather important details about the experiences of the group. The group discussions centered on what the members learned and what they thought about the culture of FFA at the convention. Finally, the fourth data set featured introductory, probing, and clarifying questions during a semi-structured interview with the members three weeks after the convention. The 15 interviews ranged from six to fifteen minutes in length. The interviews explored the experiences of the members while at the convention.

### **Data Analysis**

The theory of organizational culture served as the framework for the data analysis. The use of a theory to guide data analysis was an appropriate design for a post-positivist research study (Yin, 2009; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). This research followed the ladder of analytical abstraction for the data analysis outline (Carney, 1990). The ladder of analytical abstraction had five stages. The purpose of Stage 1 was to transcribe the notes and interviews. We conducted 30 interviews, observed the members six different times, and conducted five focus groups. The resulting data set included nearly five hours of audio recordings, which was transcribed into approximately 6,000 lines of data. The goal of Stage 2 was to begin the coding process by identifying passages in the data set, which related to the research questions. We employed a structural coding technique tying together the research questions and codes (Saldaña, 2013). We coded the data according to the codes identified from the research questions. These codes were grounded in the framework of organizational culture as described by Schein (2010).

The members' experiences at the National FFA Convention's opening session, career expo, and a workshop represented the artifacts of the National FFA Organization. These three artifacts were multifaceted events that each member experienced. We coded statements from members about their experiences at each of these events. For instance, Amber commented about how she enjoyed the laser light show when they were introducing the National FFA Officers, which was coded for the opening session. The members' perceptions of their fit in the organization aligned to the espoused beliefs and values of the National FFA Organization. The members' interpretation of the beliefs and values of FFA was significant because of this study's goal to explore the members' participation in FFA events. We coded for statements from members about their ability to identify with FFA. For example, Tami discussed how she could identify with FFA because she did not want to leave the organization after graduation.

Stage 3 of the ladder of analytical abstraction was the transformation of coded data into themes. This was a two-step process. In Stage 3a, we organized all highlighted passages into a 34-page data matrix. Stage 3b was to code the data matrix to identify themes and subthemes according to each research question. Nine themes were identified. This analysis was packaged into a seven-page theme matrix. Stage 4 of the data analysis required us to cross-check the themes. This additional layer of data analysis allowed us to refine and verify the themes. The goal of the ladder's Stage 5, representing analytical abstraction, was to synthesize the data into a concise paragraph. We developed a research section summary to highlight the abstracted findings of the study.

## **Measures of Verification**

The application of numerous standards of qualitative rigor helped ensure the research was conducted correctly and that the findings had merit. We used standards of qualitative rigor from Yin's (2009) case study methodology. We built construct validity (i.e., credibility) into the study by utilizing multiple sources of data and developing a chain of evidence during the data collection phase. Construct validity was also developed by discussing the initial findings of the report with key informants, the FFA members. The goal of establishing reliability was to minimize errors and biases. We developed reliability by constructing an audit trail. The audit trail included the interview protocols, notes from the interviews and observations, initial data analysis notes, and an outline of data analysis procedures (Yin, 2009). Internal validity (i.e., credibility) described the way that conclusions were drawn from the data. The internal validity of the findings was established through the exploration of rival explanations of the observed phenomenon. We encouraged participants to talk about ideas and experiences that countered the theoretical explanation of organizational culture. External validity (i.e., transferability) referred to the ability of the findings to be generalized beyond the observed case. We acknowledged that single-case study design does not have the ability to make strong generalizations; however, an analytical generalization, which utilizes a theory as a template to facilitate the study, was appropriate (Yin, 2009).

## **Results**

The findings section was divided into themes which emerged from the data based on the data points before, during, and after the 2012 National FFA Convention.

### **Before the Convention Theme: Members Attempted to Negotiate their Fit**

The Belmont agriculture program required students to become FFA members. The membership mandate led to different expectations from members as they anticipated their involvement in FFA. Beth could not recall why she joined beyond saying, "I guess it was a requirement for the class." Sally echoed this same feeling, "I didn't really know what FFA was when I first joined. It was just like in pre-vet; we also do FFA, and I just joined because it was part of the class." The interviews with the juniors revealed their lack of knowledge about FFA. Some students joined with the intention of having new experiences. Tami said, "Well, I joined because I wanna go out and meet new people, because I like to meet people. I'm a people person. I like to talk to people, like to interact with people. So I'm, very talkative." None of the juniors listed any specific FFA activity or benefit from membership other than general personal development attributes. Most had no FFA experiences beyond the few activities their chapter hosted. Their preconceived notions about the organization were limited.

The first interviews focused on how members found connections to FFA. The junior year members needed some time to think through their answer. Andrea said, "I'm not really sure yet." Beth answered, "I think so, yeah. ... Well like, like... I just think so." These answers were not surprising considering the juniors had attended very few FFA activities. The seniors had a clearer conceptualization of their connections to FFA. Raul saw FFA as a way to develop his leadership skills. "Yeah, you know I'm in ROTC and JROTC, and we learn a lot about leadership and our potential as people, and we do the similar thing [in] FFA." Some of the seniors aligned their FFA identities with their enthusiasm for working with animals. Tami said, "Yes I have [found an identity in FFA]... working with animals is rewarding. And they also can be your best friend." The interviews before the National FFA Convention highlighted the ability of the seniors to identify with FFA after one year.

**During the Convention Theme: A Heightened Cultural Awareness**

The members cited a heightened sense of cultural awareness while walking around the National FFA Convention Career Expo. The awareness was typically their curiosity about people from different places; however, the members did spend time unpacking their own culture and contemplating the interesting aspects of other cultures. Sasha, Yolanda, and Raul wandered through the Career Expo floor for more than an hour. The first day was less crowded, and they were able to have more interactions with other FFA members. Yolanda spotted a small group of Black FFA members walking through the Career Expo. She exclaimed, "Hey, Black people, you never see them here." She later claimed that her statement was a joke.

Most of the members expressed an interest in the different accents they were hearing. A member during a different focus group commented, "As soon as you talk to somebody from somewhere else, you catch on the accent and it's awesome." This awareness of other people's accents caused them to think about their accents. One student noted, "They probably had the interpretation of us being from the city because we have the city accent." One member during focus group session expressed concern about how they might sound if they talked to a college recruiter: "The recruiter will think [we] talk like urban ghetto kids. They'll just look down." The members seemed to be able to draw links between their different accent and culture compared to the accents and cultures of the predominantly rural and white members.

**During the Convention Theme: Lack of Meaningful Intergroup Interactions**

The members spent most of their time at the Career Expo either aimlessly walking around or seeking autographs. They did not engage people in meaningful conversations. The term meaningful conversation is used subjectively; we considered members talking to anyone for more than one minute as meaningful. Members got distracted with finding signatures, obtaining free items, and doing activities within their smaller group. The only directive their advisors gave them was to collect FFA members' signatures from across the nation. The National FFA Convention guidebook included an autograph page with each state and territory listed followed by signature lines for FFA members from that state or territory to sign. The autograph prerogative seemed a good start; however, the Career Expo quickly became congested and even soliciting random FFA members for signatures became cumbersome. The search for free promotional items (e.g., sunglasses, pens, snacks) provided by the exhibitors also occupied the members' time at the Career Expo. Yolanda was excited about exploring the Expo on the first day. As the group was registering, she excitedly said, "There are people taking our free stuff!" Members were often diligent in their quest for freebies once in the Expo. They would only approach booths and talk if they knew they would receive a free item. Sara said she had a meaningful conversation with a college-aged woman about agricultural sororities; however, this conversation had lasted less than a minute. Sara later admitted that she was only trying to get autographs. As one member said during the focus groups, "I didn't really talk to anybody."

**During the Convention Theme: Members Investing into the Opening Session Activities**

The Belmont FFA members attended the second of the repeated Opening Sessions on the morning of the second day of the convention. Some members participated in the fun atmosphere of the session. A few members danced to the music playing before the start of the session. Later the new FFA mascot, Flyte, a human-sized owl, appeared in the mezzanine above. Maria and Andrea rushed to dance with the owl and other FFA members. Most of our group stood-up and cheered to welcome the National FFA Officers as they walked on stage. Yolanda, the chapter Vice-President, repeated her lines of the FFA Opening Ceremony with the National FFA Vice-

President. All of the members stood-up to recite the passage encouraging engagement, "FFA members, why we are here?" at the end of the FFA Opening Ceremony.

Students started to look a little sleepy during the National FFA Advisor's speech. Raul complained everyone was repeating themselves during their speeches by constantly welcoming us and hyping the convention. Yolanda, Sasha, and another student began to doze off by the time the FFA Band started to play. Other students visibly strained to stay awake. Their interests were peaked when Scott Hamilton, the keynote speaker, started speaking. However, a few members--even during what should be the wake-up call of the convention--started to fall asleep again during Hamilton's speech. When a sleeping member was asked why they couldn't stay awake, they replied: "It [the speaker] was boring."

Some members appreciated the messages they heard during the Opening Session. They expressed their opinions during the focus groups later that the evening. The following dialogue highlighted the positive messages a few students took away from the Louisiana FFA member who was once homeless and food insecure and told her story during the Opening Session:

Lorie - "The one part was kind of sad because you had to hear her [an FFA member who was formerly homeless and food insecure] life story."

Caroline - "I think at the same time it was actually rewarding because you actually could see how she came back from what happened to her, and [she] actually be[came] a positive influence on other people and see that how she didn't let her situation bring her down."

These opinions about the messages from the Louisiana FFA member were generally shared by Belmont members.

### **During the Convention Theme: Workshops Produced Mixed Results for the Members**

Mrs. Kroner and Ms. Hamilton expected their members to attend at least one leadership workshop at the convention. Members had their choice of different workshops during the afternoon of the second day. The group arrived at the convention hall late and a crowd had already formed. The room hit capacity before all of us could enter. Only three members attended the first workshop and four members attended another workshop later in the afternoon. The seven members who attended the workshops expressed mixed feelings about their experience. Maria seemed to have the most profound experience. We witnessed her demonstrating leadership skills in front of 200 other FFA members. She spoke to the gathering twice, later saying it was the highlight of the convention for her. The workshop got her out of her shell. "Yeah," she agreed, "It built up my confidence." Another member at the same workshop said, "Oh yeah, Maria was definitely in her element. She started standing up. She was really participating." The three members at the other workshop did not have the same experience as Maria. One reported that during the group activities, "[I] ended up standing off to the side."

### **After the Convention Theme: Convention Helped Create Meaningful FFA Connections**

Members generally had a positive experience at the convention. Maria said, "My experience was amazing. I got to meet a lot of new people. I developed my leadership skills. And, overall I felt like it was a pretty good experience." They noticed the many rural agriculture images compared to the sparser urban agricultural images. Amber was asked if the agriculture she saw matched what she sees near her home. She replied simply, "No. Most of it was farming." Some of the members were able to rationalize this rural focus through their experience as pre-veterinary students. Linda discussed the lack of urban agriculture concepts at the convention. "[It] is probably more in the little cities because there are more people that know about it... I'm okay with it; [the rural agriculture focus] is not that bad." Some members were not discouraged by the ruralness of the convention; in fact, some members contextualized the

messages to have meaning in their own urban contexts. Raul believed in this same type of linkage between rural and urban agriculture. "I see chickens in the city all time. People have them in their backyards.... [the agriculture emphasis at convention] was a good balance; there were things that can be taken back to the urban lifestyle." While some members took meaning from the rural-centered agriculture messages at the convention, other members wanted to see more artifacts of urban agriculture.

Most Belmont members thought they could connect with FFA. Tami discussed how she did not want to leave the convention. "It felt good. I felt like I was a member, and I felt like a professional officer there. I had a lot of fun. Right now, I'm set on going to a community college. I may end up starting an FFA chapter there." The FFA jacket also had an interesting persuasive ability to strengthen members' perceived connection to FFA. Yolanda said the jacket "Makes you feel official; like you're from a different chapter, but we're all one." Some members did not develop a connection to FFA after the convention. Caroline felt conflicted about her connection. Before the convention she did not know if she had a connection, and after the convention she reported she felt kind of like a member. She described it simply as, "Kind of in the middle." Amber reported, "I still feel the same. I'm still a member, but not really doing anything. You pay the dues, but you don't really do anything for the agriculture thing." However, this lack of connection to FFA was only discussed by three of the fifteen members.

#### **After the Convention Theme: Members Critique of the Convention's Educational Elements**

Members had a variety of comments about how the convention could change. Some members wanted to see more small animals. For instance, Beth wanted to see more animals at the Career Expo. Busch Gardens had a large exhibit featuring a variety of different animals. Beth enjoyed looking at the penguins, toucans, and an armadillo. Both Stephanie and Maggie agreed with Beth. They thought the Busch Garden's exhibit aligned to what they studied in the pre-veterinary program. Not every member wanted only more urban agricultural elements. Maria and Yolanda actually wanted more artifacts of production agriculture. Maria said, "I think there should be a lot more involvement with growing plants and stuff. I know how to cooperate more [with] people, but I think I need to learn more about how to grow plants." In general, members wanted more agricultural topics, including rural and urban topics, and they were surprised that the convention did not have more educational moments.

#### **After the Convention Theme: The Convention Created Meaning in Members' Lives**

The convention provided messages which members applied to their own personal lives. For instance, Raul believed he had found his future career. "I learned that I like horticulture a lot. I think that might be the job I want." The most common reference among members was Scott Hamilton's keynote address during the Opening Session. Maggie discussed how she tried to apply his message to her everyday life. "Hearing him talk about how he didn't want things to get him down and everything, that kind of made me focus that maybe I should start doing that, and not letting what people say or do get me down." Sasha had a similar response and related it to her school work. "He kept going, and he didn't let his sickness keep him down; he kept going.... in school if I get a bad grade I [need to] keep going and not just stop." Maria said, "It was an inspiration; don't let my ADHD disability get [in] my way." Scott Hamilton's message was not the only message, which made members think about their own lives.

#### **After the Convention Theme: Convention Motivated Members to Become More Active**

Some members were motivated to help build the Belmont FFA chapter. Raul wanted to increase the chapter's membership. "I want to get more recruits. We are a small club in a big

school.” Maggie had the same idea as Raul, and she had a plan to increase program awareness within the school. “[I would] probably expand more, like get us to do more things with the school. Maybe have a little program where we go and talk to classes about what FFA is, and what pre-vet is because a lot of the kids don’t really know.” Other members were more interested in working within the chapter to improve their local community. Tami said, “I think we should get a little more involved in community services and help other people as much as we can, probably growing our own garden maybe.” Sally explained, “We could do stuff at the school that may be able to bleed over [in]to the community. We have access to horticulture here, and they could grow stuff, and we could package it, and we could do community service stuff.” Other members echoed all of these comments when they were discussing the homeless Louisiana FFA member. Community service activities, which helped the homeless and food insecure, were one way the group perceived their chapter could build community connections.

### **Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications**

This study had several limitations. We purposively selected an urban FFA chapter to investigate, and any applications to other urban FFA chapters and members are limited to the reader’s ability to transfer the findings to his or her specific contexts. Also, the data focused primarily on interviews and focus groups sessions with adolescents, who tend to have shorter interviews compared to adults. Finally, the participants of this study were willing and eager to experience the organizational culture of FFA. This final section was arranged with conclusions, recommendations, and implications for each research question.

#### **Research Question One: Negotiating Connection (or Lack Thereof) before Convention**

The junior year members’ lack of FFA organizational culture awareness hampered their ability to find connections to FFA. Research of diverse FFA members also indicated that diverse agriculture students lacked information and roles models in FFA (LaVergne, Larke, Elbert, & Jones, 2011). Junior year members could not readily identify with the rural nature or the leadership possibilities within the organization (Phipps, Osborne, Dyer, & Ball, 2008). Senior year members did have connections to FFA and were grounded in some of the elements of its organizational culture; however, their lack of experience in FFA limited their conceptualizations. This limited viewpoint could have some positive attributes. The members did not experience negative FFA stereotypes (Hoover & Scanlon, 1991; Phelps, Henry, & Bird, 2012); they were not put-off by rural-centered topics of FFA (Martin & Kitchel, 2013) nor were they intimidated by the overall white membership of FFA (Lawrence, Rayfield, Moore, & Outley, 2013). These conclusions seemed to counter the findings of other organizational culture studies (e.g., Maier, 1999; Simpson, 1998) as these members were willing to become active in FFA.

However, these conclusions need to be understood in the context of the Belmont FFA members who attended the National FFA Convention. These members wanted to attend the FFA convention and were eager to imagine themselves as members in FFA. We cannot ascertain the perceptions of the Belmont agriculture students who did not want to go to convention. Furthermore, the demographics of the members who attended the convention were predominantly Caucasian, which did not reflect the predominantly African-American population of the Belmont agriculture program and school. We are not placing judgment on the recruitment strategies of the Belmont FFA advisors nor are we arguing that FFA only attracts Caucasian members to participate; nonetheless, the conclusions of this study need to be understood with the context of the members who attended the convention.

The requirement of all students enrolled in horticulture and veterinary science to pay FFA dues circumvented the problem of urban agriculture students not joining FFA because of a possible lack of fit into the organizational culture (Borden et al., 2005; HFRP, 2004); yet, the

problem of members connecting within FFA remained. The Belmont FFA members needed more information to solidify their connection (LaVergne et al., 2011; Roberts, Hall, Briers, Gill, Shinn, Larke, & Jaure, 2009). Nonetheless, the FFA membership requirement led to complex issues with members' sense of connection to the organization. The members crafted a niche for themselves with what they perceived as the organizational culture of FFA. They framed their experience through the Belmont FFA chapter. Schein (2010) would have referred to the Belmont FFA chapter as a subculture within the larger organizational culture of the FFA Organization.

We recommend recruiting more urban agriculture students to become active FFA members. The development of a strong local chapter identity would help urban members find ways to become more active. Teacher educators and FFA leaders need to find ways to help local urban FFA advisors develop unique chapter identities. Local advisors as well as state association and national organization leaders need to develop and market introductory FFA programs and activities that help urban agriculture students develop a clear connection to FFA. Urban FFA members will not be able to reap the full benefits of FFA membership if they do not understand the potential benefits of involvement or do not have programs and activities designed for their context. Researchers can help this process by conducting studies leading to pinpointing the programmatic needs of urban and diverse FFA members.

### **Research Question Two: Members Experiences at Convention**

Some Belmont FFA members identified the artifacts at the convention as rural in nature, which aligned to the historical design of FFA (Martin & Kitchel, 2013). Most of the Belmont FFA members were not put-off by the lack of urban agriculture artifacts. The ruralness and mainly white FFA members of the convention created a sense of curiosity, nervousness, and wanting among some members. However, they did not talk about negative stereotypes of rural FFA members (Hoover & Scanlon, 1991; Phelps, Henry, & Bird, 2012) and agriculture (Jones & Bowen, 1998; Talbert & Larke, 1995; Warren & Alston, 2007). Some of the other Belmont FFA members were not as enthusiastic about the rural themes. They recognized a lack of urban agriculture topics (LaVergne, Jones, Elbert, & Larke, 2012). The members appreciated the differences; yet, they were nervous about their own urban identity. Nonetheless, most of the members appreciated the meaning behind these messages of personal development and community service. These members viewed the rural agriculture topics as the context for the more relatable messages of personal development and community service of FFA (Anderson & Kim; 2009; Roberts et al., 2009).

The members discussed how they identified with the organizational culture of FFA displayed at the convention, especially the espoused beliefs and values of personal development and community, which they identified at the convention. Therefore, urban FFA members may develop greater connections to FFA if they participate in more programs focusing on personal development and community service. From a practical perspective, some of the espoused educational purposes of the convention may not be fully realized. For example, the Belmont FFA members struggled to engage with both the exhibitors and other FFA members. This struggle could partly be attributed to the cultural differences between the predominantly rural artifacts and people at convention and urban Belmont FFA members.

We recommend advisors explicitly prepare their students for their time at the convention. Advisors should not assume students know why they are at a convention or how to engage in convention activities. Given the lack of FFA experiences and connections prior to the convention, this issue could be exacerbated with urban FFA members. We also recommend the National FFA Organization incorporate more urban agriculture topics at convention meetings. While the Belmont members appreciated the rural topics, some still wanted to see more urban agriculture exhibits.

**Research Question Three: Negotiating Connections to FFA after the Convention**

The following conclusions must once again be understood in the context of the Belmont FFA members who attended the convention. These members were willing and eager to experience the organizational culture of FFA and were searching for their identity in the organization. Many of these Belmont FFA members found connections to FFA soon after the convention. Most members perceived that they belonged in the organization. We must note that a few of the members did not develop a personal connection to FFA during convention; however, they were still positive about their experiences. We do not want to minimize their inability to really connect with FFA at convention. These members were not necessarily put off or discouraged by what they experienced at convention; they just did not become motivated to find their niche in FFA. The rural organizational culture (Martin & Kitchel, 2013) presented at the National FFA Convention was not a major barrier. They did not express negative perceptions of FFA members (Hoover & Scanlon, 1991; Phelps, Henry, & Bird, 2012) and agriculture (Jones & Bowen, 1998; Talbert & Larke, 1995). Some members even tried to tie the rural messages to their urban context. Their efforts are rather extraordinary according to traditional research on youth organizations, which indicates that organizations need to meet the cultural needs of youth before they will become involved (Borden et al., 2005; HFRP, 2004; Larson, 1994). Most of the Belmont FFA members were willing to work within the agricultural context of FFA because they agreed with the values of the organization. These values provided a cultural link for these members (Larson, 1994).

Many of the Belmont FFA Members were able to find their own meaning in the rural artifacts, beliefs, and values of FFA. These members did not need an outside intervention program to motivate them to participate in FFA (Roberts et al., 2009). They found enough connections in the local chapter to motivate them to experience FFA. This finding implies FFA advisors can build diverse, urban FFA chapters (Brown & Kelsey, 2013; Martin & Kitchel, 2014) with effective training on how to manage multicultural classrooms (Vincent, Killingsworth, & Torres, 2012; Vincent, Kirby, Deeds, & Faulkner, 2014). The Belmont FFA members who easily identified with the organizational culture of FFA after the National FFA Convention were resilient and exhibited an understanding of their own culture. Nonetheless, while the experiences of these students seem to indicate that urban FFA advisors have opportunities to develop active urban FFA members; the context of the members who attended may have positively skewed these conclusions.

Researchers need to examine the perceptions of urban agriculture students who are not active FFA members or not wanting to be active FFA members. The perceptions and attitudes of these students were not examined in this study. Some studies have examined the perceptions of whole classrooms or programs urban agriculture students towards FFA (e.g., Martin & Kitchel, 2014); yet, few studies have explored these perceptions beyond surveys. If agriculture students are not eager to be active members in FFA because of the organizational culture of FFA, then this would be a barrier that still needs to be examined. The relatively few minority members who choose to attend the convention from the very diverse membership of the Belmont FFA chapter highlight the complexity of this issue. Some of these issues were brought forward in this study, such as the lack of FFA members of color at convention, which was similarly echoed in other studies (LaVergne et al., 2011; Roberts et al., 2009). While the students of color from the Belmont FFA chapter recognized this issue and did not view it as a barrier to their participation in FFA, it was still identified and may be a barrier for other urban agriculture students who are not as eager to be involved in FFA.

We also recommend the National FFA Organization provide more explicit educational moments regarding agriculture at the convention. The convention does feature educational tours (FFA, 2014c); however, these activities are typically off-site. The members said they wanted to actually learn about agriculture as much as they wanted to be motivated. We also recommend

research on the topic of urban FFA advisors. Urban FFA advisors and agriculture teachers face unique challenges and opportunities compared to their rural counterparts (Bird, Tummons, Martin, & Henry, 2013; Cano & Moore, 2010; Esters & Bowen, 2005; Soloninka, 2003; Talbert & Edwin, 2008). Previous research has highlighted some of these points (e.g., Warner & Washburn, 2009); however, more research is needed to explore this phenomenon.

### **Summary**

This research focused on the urban FFA members' experiences of the organizational culture on display at the National FFA Convention. While some emergent issues may also affect rural FFA members (e.g., the problems with searching for autographs and free items at the Career Expo), some issues were solely related to the urban members of the study. The members of Belmont FFA did not generally perceive their experiences at the National FFA Convention as a barrier to their involvement in FFA. Most were positive towards many of the FFA artifacts at the convention, which included: wearing the FFA jacket; ruralness of the other FFA members; rural nature of the messages at the Career Expo and Opening Session; and the FFA pageantry displayed the opening session. The members' positive feelings towards these artifacts are important because we had identified these as possible barriers for urban members. The Belmont FFA members also agreed with what they interpreted to be the beliefs and values of FFA: personal and community development. They wanted to partake in FFA activities focused on these beliefs and values.

The rural nature of FFA (Martin & Kitchel, 2013) was displayed at the National FFA Convention. Findings from studies on youth organizations suggested the ruralness of FFA would not appeal to urban youth and would create disconnects with urban students (Borden et al., 2005; HFRP, 2004; Herrera & Arbreton, 2003). We argued the rural nature of the convention was a taken-for-granted feature of the convention. However, the Belmont FFA members actually enjoyed and tried to connect with the rural themes they witnessed at the convention. The members wanted to learn more about agriculture practiced in rural communities. They also tried to connect their experiences in urban agriculture with the rural agriculture themes presented at convention. While this finding was surprising, we must reiterate that these members were excited about going to the National FFA Convention and may have been more willing to work within the culture of FFA.

The Belmont FFA members found that their values fit in with the mission and motto of the FFA to develop youth and serve communities (FFA, 2014d). Many of the members sought to find a fit in the rural organizational culture of FFA so they could be part of the personal development and community development activities the organization offered. The ability of these FFA members to look beyond the rural FFA artifacts and identify with the beliefs and values of the organization demonstrated the power of FFA's organizational culture (Richard, McMillon-Capehart, Bhuian, & Taylor, 2009; Schein, 2010). This finding has importance for urban youth organizers and leaders. Urban students have unique cultural needs that must be addressed (Kwon, 2006; Larson, 1994); however, cultural differences can be overcome if the students are eager and organizational leaders help them find their fit into the organization. If the experiences of the Belmont FFA members are transferable to other urban FFA chapters, then the National FFA Organization can reach out to more diverse audiences (FFA, 2014a) and meet the demands of the ever-changing American society (Moule, 2011).

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## **Appendix A – Interview and Focus Group Protocols**

### *First Interview Protocol*

Why did you enroll in an agriculture class?  
What do you think agriculture is in your community?  
Does the content in your agriculture classes match the agriculture in your community?  
Why did you join the FFA?  
What have been your best experiences in the FFA so far?  
What kind of agricultural topics do you learn about in the FFA?  
Have you done any FFA activities at the chapter level and/or beyond the chapter level?  
Do you identify with the FFA?  
What kinds of students join the FFA?  
Do the agricultural topics of the FFA align to the agriculture in your community?  
What do you expect to see, do, and learn from the upcoming National FFA Convention?

### *First Focus Group Protocol*

How was your first day at the convention?  
What was the best part?  
What events did you go to?  
What did you learn?  
What surprised you?  
Do you feel like you are a FFA member?  
Was there anything you wish was different?  
What do you look forward to tomorrow?

### *Second Focus Group Protocol*

How was your second day at the convention?  
What was the best part?  
What events did you go to?  
What did you learn?  
What surprised you?  
Do you feel like you are a FFA member?  
How would you describe the National FFA Convention?  
How would you describe the FFA?  
How will you take back what you learned to your home school and chapter?

### *Second Interview Protocol*

How was your experience at the National FFA Convention?  
What was your best experience while at the convention?  
What was the most surprising experience?  
Did you meet any other FFA members from other schools?  
Did the experience match your expectations?  
Did the agricultural content at the convention match the agriculture in your community?  
Do you identify more or less with the FFA after this experience?  
Did the convention motivate you to become more active in the FFA?  
If you could change something about the convention what would it be?