

An Analysis of Selection and Training Procedures for National FFA Officer Candidates

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Introduction

As enactment of its mission to develop “premier leaders,” each year the National FFA Organization elects six active members to lead the organization. Each fall, a new group of National FFA Officers is elected to serve a one-year term, representing over 600,000 FFA members nationwide. Selection occurs after a nearly week-long interview process that evaluates candidates using an eight competency evaluation system originally introduced in 2006 (National Officer Selection Handbook, 2014). Despite the consistent process by which candidates are evaluated during the interview process, there is a great deal of variation among how candidates are selected and prepared. State-by-state differences have varied greatly throughout the past decade (Hoover & Atwater, 2005; Berkebile, 2011). Across the nation, state agricultural education leaders voice a common desire for information, resources, and research related to best practices for selecting and preparing National FFA Officer Candidates.

Theoretical Framework

Describing an approach to leadership and the process of using different approaches to enhance leadership in real life situations is a means to qualify training procedures of individuals striving to achieve a leadership outcome. In *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, Northouse describes seven categories of leadership theory: Trait Approach, Skills Approach, Style Approach, Situational Theory, Contingency Approach, Path-Goal Theory, and Leader-Member Exchange Theory (Northouse, 2007). This study utilizes the Skills Approach as it relates to the process of selecting leaders based on skills or “competencies”. The Skills Approach identifies three factors that influence leadership: Individual Attributes, Competencies, and Leadership Outcomes, each of which is impacted by Environmental Influences (Mumford et al, 2000). For this study, an additional aspect, Preparation, was considered within Environmental Influences. An individual’s Preparation, in the form of training, is likely an environmental influence which, when combined with individual attributes, can improve competencies and impact leadership outcomes.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the selection processes and preparation techniques of candidates seeking National FFA Office, ultimately identifying common techniques and best practices utilized by candidates. As such, the following objectives were developed: 1) Identify information on candidate support, training and selection, and 2) Compare National FFA Officer Candidates’ approach to preparation by level of advancement in the selection process.

Methodology

National FFA Officer candidates from 2011-2015 were the target population (N=196). Not all candidates could be identified with a valid email address, resulting in an accessible population of 155. A 35 item researcher-developed instrument was utilized for this study. The instrument consisted of four sections: 1) Demographics, 2) Support System, 3) Training Schedule/Responsibilities, and 4) National FFA Officer Selection Process. Face and content validity was evaluated by a panel of experts. The instrument was administered online via Qualtrics, using a modified Dillman’s tailored design with four points of contact. A total of 93 candidates responded, yielding a 60% response rate.

Results/Findings

Nearly half of all candidates reported experiencing a “semi-structured process” to preparation, meaning they developed a plan for preparation with assistance from others (n = 44). Approximately 44.7% of Phase 2 candidates (those advancing to the second round of interviews) and 44.4% of those elected to National Office, respectively, identified a semi-structured process. Only 15.8% and 22.2%, respectively, indicated a structured process was provided for them.

A total of 53 candidates (58.9%) reported receiving financial assistance to support training with 71.1% of Phase 2 candidates and 50% of National Officers identifying they received financial support. Sources of funding included State FFA Associations, family, State FFA Alumni, and State FFA Foundations. A large majority (83.0%) of candidates who advanced to Phase 2 or were elected to National Office reported completing full- or part-time internships or summer jobs during candidacy. No candidates reported internships or work focused on preparation for candidacy. A vast majority of candidates (95.2%) including those selected to National FFA Office were enrolled as full-time students during the fall semester of candidacy.

When asked to compare practice interviews to the actual interview process experienced, the majority of candidates who did not reach Phase 2 indicated Somewhat Similar (37.5%) or Very Similar (36.9%). Candidates who advanced to Phase 2 but were not selected as Officers leaned more closely to Very Similar (51.0%) while those who were elected expressed even greater congruence in training with 64.7% indicating Very Similar.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

A semi-structured process of preparation was most common among candidates, indicating some input or direction is provided by state leaders or mentors. Financial assistance was available to over half of the candidates. Such assistance allowed candidates to focus on their candidacy rather than being restricted due to funding. The majority reported completing an internship or summer job during candidacy and being enrolled as a full-time student. Nonetheless, candidates reported allocating a great deal of time to preparation, particularly leading up to convention. While frequency of training is an important aspect, the similarity of training to the national process is even more critical. A number of candidates elected to National FFA office reported training less than other candidates, but indicated that their training was very similar to the national process.

Respondents provided insight into common practices and approaches to selecting and supporting National FFA Officer candidates. While only a portion of the study could be reported in this limited abstract, findings may better enable state leaders to develop beneficial procedures, opportunities, and resources for selection and training. Additionally, some findings may refute common beliefs about successful candidates in terms of employment and college enrollment.

While candidate selection and preparation will likely always vary from state to state, information and support from National FFA should identify best practices that candidates may utilize in preparation. Further research in all areas of the selection process are necessary. State associations, FFA chapters, and FFA members themselves devote a great deal of time, money, energy, and passion to National FFA Officer selection. It is only right that National FFA continues to improve the selection process and make the opportunity as fair and transparent as possible.

References

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