

The Growth in Leadership Skills and Development of Fellowship through Literacy.

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

There is an ever-growing need for leadership in the agricultural industry. While these skills are usually honed during high school programs, such as athletics, 4-H, and FFA, there is an even larger need for these skills at the collegiate level. Layfield et al. (2000) found significant growth in leadership skills among students involved in leadership organizations in their collegiate experience.

Within North Carolina State University, rural students make up 34% of the population. With the majority of these students wanting to pursue leadership-based careers and eventually return to their rural communities, program leaders undertook the task of creating an environment for these students to grow as leaders among members of other rural communities. The Rurally Engaged Agricultural Leaders (REAL) program was created to provide students with an opportunity to further develop their personal and civic leadership skills while addressing agricultural and rural issues impacting their state and communities. In addition, students complete an Extension experience to better understand the role of Extension in agriculture and rural areas. It was the hope of the program leaders to provide rural students with a group to which they can belong. Rural students often struggle to find community at larger institutions due to the large populations or universities being the same size as the communities they are from, causing feelings of disconnect or lack of community.

To accompany program sessions, students participate in small group book clubs where they dive deeper into topics of leadership and rural issues. The books included: “The Truth About Leadership” and “Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century”. The book club sessions were led by the program's graduate assistant, who met with the book club groups twice a month and facilitated the conversations.

How it Works

The students applied to the REAL program and were selected based on their applications. Students were required to be from rural communities and enrolled in an agricultural-related degree program. Within the applications, students shared their rural community/county, career interests, college department, and potential goals they hoped to accomplish through participating in the program. The applications were then evaluated by program faculty, Extension agents, and community stakeholders, and twelve participants were selected.

Program directors selected the books, with one focused on leadership and one addressing rural communities. Focusing on one book per semester, participants completed the assigned readings and were guided by reflection questions developed by the program graduate assistant. Twice a month, participants were expected to complete the readings and encouraged to use the questions to learn more about themselves as leaders and relate the readings to their leadership development and rural communities. The students meet every other Friday and select five questions from the list to discuss within their small book club groups. The book club facilitator was responsible for assigning readings, providing pre-questions about the readings, and directing the discussion at the club meetings. As facilitators, it was their responsibility to help the students dig deeper into the understanding of the book concepts and further develop reflection questions to help them grow as individuals. Students were also encouraged to use the readings as support for the program field trips. The book club facilitator was able to help students understand the connections between the books and the leaders they met during field trips. In addition, the

readings served as a guide to develop questions to ask guest speakers and those agricultural leaders they met with during the program.

Results to Date

To date, the book club has brought 20 students, from first-year students to doctoral students at North Carolina State University, together to learn about leadership and agriculture and partake in fellowship. These students vary in major, agricultural experience, and future career goals. However, when brought together, the students create discussion from personal experience with respect and integrity. They are able to learn about others' opinions of leadership and agriculture, therefore helping them to grow as individuals. When asked what they have received from the book club, one student stated, "I have gotten a better understanding of what it means to be a true leader and the very important aspects of a leader. I have also gotten to know the people in the program. We all come from different parts of the state, yet we are connected through the world of agriculture." While another student stated, "I feel like the book club meetings have really impacted my leadership qualities personally because of how much I have gained from them. One important leadership quality that the book club has impacted me would be listening. While everyone is sharing their answers to the questions each week, I get to improve my active listening skills. I feel like the course of the months of being in this has helped me carry this into my daily life conversations with friends and family. I just recently got a compliment from a friend for being such a good active listener. I felt like it was so much more than a compliment because I have been able to grow in this area where I once wasn't as strong."

Future Plans/Advice to Others

In the future, we plan to incorporate partners for book club sessions to promote further networking and relationship-building among the REAL cohort. For the partner sessions, the students will grab lunch or coffee and discuss questions provided by the book club facilitator. Then at the larger book club session, students are able to share their partner discussions with greater context. This is suggested to help them improve their leadership ability and keep each other in check and create more profound discussions surrounding their home communities and personal leadership experiences. Research supports that fellowship among students promotes success and establishing community; therefore, by allowing the students to create these friendships, they are more likely to thrive in an environment which they are not familiar with.

We strongly suggest that those interested in establishing book club programs select books relatable to participants. The books selected for our book club have scenarios and situations that college students could relate to, which aided in generating conversation. Also, participants enjoyed having pre-questions to guide their readings. These pre-questions also assisted students in their participation.

Cost/Resources Needed

To support the REAL book club, program leaders paid for the books. "The Truth About Leadership" costs \$13.98 per book, and "Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century" costs \$29.95 per book. Books were provided for each participant, the program leader, and the graduate program assistant. The REAL program was created through grant funding which supported a graduate assistant. The graduate assistant who leads the book clubs and assists with the overall program is paid through this grant.

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