

Using an FFA Officer Leadership Curriculum to Develop Leadership Skills in Middle School Agriculture Students

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Introduction

All students in grades six through 12 who are involved in agricultural education at schools housing one of the 8,817 local FFA chapters across the United States have the opportunity to be active members of the organization (National FFA Organization, 2021a). According to the official manual of the National FFA Organization (2021b), active membership is key to the success of the organization and “drives” its organizational goals of being a student-led organization (p.10). Local chapters enroll members, elect chapter officers, and actively engage in the countless opportunities that support the FFA mission (National FFA Organization, 2021b). However, teachers have expressed that they need support to build and manage a successful FFA chapter. This is especially true of teachers with little agricultural education background (Crutchfield, 2016). In addition, the development of lesson plans for training chapter officers has been identified as an essential component of supporting our FFA advisors by the National FFA Organization (Crutchfield, 2016). Further, middle school agricultural education programs have been identified as the starting point for many students to explore agriculture-related industries and careers (National Council for Agricultural Education, 2000). Researchers have found that middle school students need instructional efforts centered around guided personal development and agriculture literacy (Rayfield & Croom, 2010). This innovative idea seeks to provide middle school agriculture educators with a comprehensive middle school officer training plan for both the fall and spring teaching semesters.

How it Works

Using an FFA officer training curriculum designed specifically for middle school students, agriculture instructors can follow, initiate, and facilitate a comprehensive middle school FFA officer leadership training experience for newly elected and developing officers. FFA develops leadership skills in youth, which is a primary reason they continue their involvement in FFA into high school (Sanok et al., 2015). The training curriculum developed for this project is straightforward and utilizes Tyler’s rational linear approach and the revised version of Bloom’s taxonomy (e.g., example training schedule/agenda, clear learning objectives, supporting learning activities, and a simple evaluation system) (Krathwohl, 2002; Wraga, 2017). The training curriculum is designed for a one to two-day format, focusing on providing leadership development in three main areas; *self*, *team*, and *chapter*. Students first participate in the introduction session, which can be tailored to fit a 20-minute to one-hour timeframe based on schedule preferences. During the introduction session, officers define personal strengths and goals through a series of icebreaker activities. These activities are centered around constructing a sense of belonging among the participants because if a student cannot relate to the group, they may ultimately feel like they do not belong to the organization (Martin & Kitchel, 2015). Between each session, the advisor has the option to implement breaks or alternative team building or icebreaker activities. Additionally, the advisor completes an evaluation sheet between sessions to track each officer’s progress. Session one centers on *self*, where students define, prioritize, and explain their roles and responsibilities. This takes into consideration The National FFA Organization’s commitment to the success of each member by providing a path for them to successfully execute each part of the organization’s mission: premier leadership, personal growth, and career success (National FFA Organization, 2019). This session can last up to two hours based on the chosen depth of the activities and reflection and can be divided into two parts.

Session two focuses on the *team*; this session supports the research that showcases the importance of agricultural educators helping students improve their interpersonal skills (Norris, 2021). FFA officer participants learn through a series of activities about servant leadership, identifying the strengths of others, and defining team goals. This session can last up to two hours or be divided into two parts, depending on the time structure. Session three spotlights the *chapter*; FFA officers develop chapter goals, review the chapter's Program of Activities (POA), and organize and develop chapter events. Research indicates that these types of FFA activities provide officers with autonomy and develop their sense of competence within the organization (Bird et al., 2020). This session can last up to three hours and can be broken up or modified based on the needs of the officer team. Lastly, setting aside time to conduct a bonding experience, like hiking, rafting, crafting, etc., is recommended as part of the program (Torrance, 2014). After the training program, officers are expected to reflect on their learning and experiences, be provided with information about the next steps in leadership development (e.g., chapter meetings, officer meetings), and undergo an individual review of their evaluation cards with the FFA advisor.

Results to Date

The first middle school FFA officer leadership training experience was offered to eight middle school students from the Saddle Ridge FFA officer team in Rock Spring, Georgia, during the Spring 2023 semester. Of the eight participating officers, six were female, and two were male. Further, three of the students attending the training indicated no prior experience with FFA leadership roles, chapter planning, or team-building activities. Prior to the training experience, middle school FFA officers expressed mixed emotions, ranging from excitement to nervousness. Following the leadership experience, each officer felt more confident in their role, connected to their peers and excited about upcoming events. These preliminary results are similar to the findings of Sanok et al. (2015), which indicated that students stay involved within the organization based on a few key factors, such as positive adult-leader interactions, personal relationships, and personal growth.

Future Plans

Future middle school, FFA officer trainings focused on expanded leadership and team development competencies are in development. These trainings may include conflict management, speech development, dinner etiquette, professional dress, and other relevant topics. Research to quantify the effectiveness of the training curriculum in developing middle school FFA Officers in self, team, and chapter objectives is planned. Lastly, using testimonies and highlights from the program participants through strategic communications as a recruitment tool for middle school FFA programs is a potential future output of the training program.

Cost and Resources Needed

The total cost for one student officer participant in Spring 2023 was \$50. This cost included all materials, one night at camp, and a night hike team activity. The FFA Advisor handled event management, scheduling, communications, and registration of extra activities. The total time investment for the advisor was two hours of preparation and two days for implementation.

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