

**Describing Leadership Development Programs Through the Lens of School-To-Work
Transition: A Case Study of Agricultural College Graduates in the 21st Century**

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Introduction

The school-to-work-transition is the phase during which an individual leaves education and commences employment (Ng & Feldman, 2007). As new graduates move from educational institutions and transition into careers, they focus on defining career goals, selecting a job, and discovering what is expected of them while navigating contextual issues (Lo Presti et al., 2022). A smooth transition from school-to-work is the foundation for a graduate's labor market entry and often their subsequent career trajectory (Steiner, et al., 2021). Failure to launch a career post-graduation has been related to negative outcomes for new graduates, such as prolonged job search, career interruptions, and overall unemployment (Lillehagen & Birkelund, 2022).

Corporate leadership development programs are on-the-job training designed to support leadership development and cross-train recent college graduates. Typically, organizations that have leadership development programs hire a cohort of graduates to whom they offer dedicated events, supplemental mentors, and exposure to executives. These programs are intended to be elite, fast-track opportunities for early career employees to rotate throughout different areas of the organization before settling into a permanent role (Moreno, 2011; Dailey, 2016).

Pathways of emerging adults who have transitioned from school-to-work need to be explored and documented to help guide college students toward sustainable careers (Blokker et al., 2023, Deming et al., 2023). Gaining insight about how new graduates participating in corporate leadership development programs make choices, enter, and progress through the world of work could help inform college and university career educators and faculty who mentor and advise undergraduates. This case study research describes agricultural graduates' experiences in corporate leadership development programs as they transitioned from college to career.

This study utilized background literature about the school-to work-transition which highlights the shift of one's primary identity as a student into one's primary identity of a worker (Ng & Feldman, 2007). However, we chose not to identify a theoretical framework to guide data collection and analysis. Instead, we wanted participants' experiences to frame the findings and guide discussion.

Purpose and Objectives

This instrumental case study describes recent college graduates' experiences in corporate leadership development programs. Specifically, we were interested in these research questions:

1. How do recent college graduates in corporate leadership development programs experience the school-to-work transition?
2. What benefits do corporate leadership development programs offer recent college graduates who are transitioning from being a student to being a worker?
3. What challenges do recent college graduates participating in corporate leadership development programs face?

Methodology

A case study approach to qualitative research can be useful for describing and understanding programs, events, or people (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and relies on collecting and analyzing multiple forms of data beyond interviews. This IRB-approved instrumental case study utilized criterion-based sampling to purposefully identify participants on LinkedIn who fit within the bounds of this case. To be eligible for participation in the study, participants must have: a. graduated from [a specific agricultural college] in May 2022; b. secured their first full-time job in a corporate leadership development program within six months of graduation; and c. continued to work for the same employer throughout the study. Three participants met the study's criteria and consented to participate. Although some may see this small number of participants as a limitation, our constructivist leanings encourage us to focus on the value of understanding and making meaning of individual perspectives within this case.

Our research team included a career educator and certified human resource professional (primary author), as well as two agricultural education faculty. Data sources included LinkedIn profiles, individual Zoom interviews, and a mapping activity as well as researcher memos.

We conducted two, 45–60-minute interviews with each participant. Open-ended questions, which included situational and hypothetical questions, were designed to understand participants' transitions from school-to-work. As part of the interviews, we also invited participants to map their most influential experiences during that transition time. Our research team used the Constant Comparative Method (CCA) by Glazer and Strauss (1967) to analyze data by comparing the responses, identifying categories, and defining themes. We protected participant identities by using pseudonyms and deidentifying employer information.

To increase credibility, we piloted interview questions with a recent graduate and conducted member checks with participants. We followed Merriam's (1998) recommendations, utilizing data source triangulation, investigator triangulation and engaging in reflective memoing throughout the entire research and data analysis process to enhance credibility.

Findings and Interpretations

Description of the Case

This case is bound by place, time, location, and context; it focuses on spring 2022 graduates from a midwestern land-grant university who entered a Leadership Development Program (LDP) within an agricultural organization within 6 months of graduation. Based on LinkedIn profiles, each participant previously interned and studied abroad. Carson worked for an agricultural processing company as a commodity merchandiser. Phoebe was an associate in a global seed and genetic trait company. Jenna was an accountant for an agricultural equipment company.

Theme 1: Acclimating to new locations and work cultures

It is customary for leadership development programs to move graduates multiple times during the program. Typically, at least one rotation requires a physical move to a new location.

Depending on the individual graduate's situation, participants found location to be both a benefit and a challenge. Carson, who was raised on a cattle farm in the Midwest, was moved out of state and then back during his leadership development program. "I was close enough to home...It was easy for me to get home if I wanted to...I didn't have to take a plane...if you move to an entirely different area like outside of the Midwest it may be a culture shock." (Interview 2, p. 13-14).

Phoebe, raised on a grain farm in a small community, was also open to moving to pursue the career she wanted. During her mapping activity, she shared, "Those [study abroads] were the reason I was comfortable, why location didn't matter to me." (Interview 1, p. 28.)

Jenna, who grew up in town, was the only fully remote participant at the time the first interview was conducted. However, after that interview, Jenna moved back to her home state to work in-person per new company policy. She explained in her second interview, "I was happy to move up to the office if that was where they needed me to be." (Interview 2, p. 5).

Participants discussed adjusting to work culture extensively during interviews. Carson, a grain merchandiser, appreciated his work culture and co-workers, "I enjoy who I work with and that is what keeps me going to work every day." (Interview 2, p. 11).

On the other-hand, Phoebe found her co-workers and work culture in her first rotation difficult. "It was with a very male kind of locker room talk... [it was] kind of diverse but not diverse... You're either white or you're Hispanic... and their backgrounds were very much [from where] they had been." However, in her second rotation which is in a small-mid-sized city, Phoebe noted that she fits well with her new co-workers. "Everyone here is just really fun." She explained why she was late for our second interview. "I got distracted at lunch talking to people." She further described her current work culture. "It's good. I know I can ask anyone any question, and have them explain it to me, and they like sharing even if it's about things in the company that frustrate them. They are open and honest... They're not trying to hide anything or sugarcoat it. Yeah, everyone at work is really great." (Interview 2, pp. 5-6).

Phoebe shared that she was recently invited to interview for a full-time position back at her first rotation which would require her to leave the leadership development program early. Because she prefers her current work culture, Phoebe was self-selecting out of interviewing. "I... was asked to interview for an agronomy role on Monday. And I'm going to say, no, I'm not going to interview... I didn't really want to go [back] there." (Interview 2, pp. 6-7). Due to the changes in work locations, and consequently work cultures, leadership development participants were forced to acclimate and reacclimate which reset their transition timelines.

Theme 2 Valuing connections inside and outside of work

Developing relationships with co-workers and within their communities was an important aspect of participants' school-to-work transitions. They described participating in volunteer activities as one way to interact with co-workers and build relationships. For Jenna, who worked remotely, developing relationships at work and building a work community was key for her school-to-work transition. "[A] major concern is a sense of finding a new identity and community within your career vs. as a student." (Interview 1, p. 11). Even though she was remote, Jenna applied tactics

that she knew were effective from her time in college. “[My company] partner[s] with United Way...I found a couple [volunteer opportunities and] ...I got everybody signed up, so we coordinated a day. We decided to volunteer at a special Olympics bowling tournament. Everybody came. Volunteering, it really helps [to] make everybody feel good and give purpose...to get together...It was really a great day.” (Interview 1, pp. 9-10).

Working on building internal relationships has been a key behavior to transition for Jenna who would not have otherwise met her co-workers in person. “It’s so much easier for me to personally make those relationships and get those questions answered...it can be very scary to send an email or send an IM to someone you’ve never met.” (Interview 1, p. 6).

It was particularly challenging for participants to find a community to socialize with both at work and outside of work. Phoebe, who describes herself as quiet, explained, “I would say, socially it was hard as I moved to [a] very rural [state]...and I moved in the summer when my job is the busiest...There weren’t a lot of young people at my site, mostly people with families.” (Interview 1, pp.6-7). When probed about where she could meet friends, she mentioned church and her apartment building. “[Church] was kind of the biggest opportunity out there. Now...I’m in [state name] it’s a lot easier being near a college campus.” (Interview 1, p. 7). Phoebe indicated that relocating was an important aspect of her adjusting to work.

Similarly, Carson struggled to develop a social network outside of work during his first rotation. “It’s just kind of hard...and that was the difference between myself and some of the people that I knew that moved up to [a different city with younger demographic]. It’s more of a young professional type of town, and there’s organizations for them to join clubs.... It’s a great way for them to meet people. I’m sure there’s something like that in [the state he moved to] but I asked around and didn’t find anything. I did meet people I lived next to but for the most part, I didn’t really develop any close friendships.” (Interview 2, p. 15). Hence, the participants highlighted the importance of building/finding community for their school-to-work transition.

Theme 3: Gaining confidence through new challenges

With structured moves built into the leadership development programs’ designs, participants continually addressed new challenges without predecessor input. As an accountant, Jenna shared her first fiscal year-end in her rotational job as the difficult challenge that she had to address. “No one really knows how to do [it] cause [its] only done once [a year], and it’s always [done] by a different person, because I’m in a rotational program. So, it was a huge learning curve.” Jenna, (Interview 1, p. 17). Jenna continued, [My company] has year-end [in October]and it can be tricky. I had only been working for 3-4 months, and it was brutal. She confessed, “It was about two weeks of working 13–14-hour days and it was exhausting. (Interview 1, p. 17). Jenna’s confidence and endurance wavered frequently. “I felt 100% wanting to bail but I just kept in the back of my mind, everyone says three years is a short amount of time.” (Interview 1, p. 18).

Similarly, Carson felt challenged shortly after he started working in his first rotation. He was under a lot of time pressure due to caring for live animals but also because they were short-staffed, and he was inexperienced. “The person who’s job I took over in the office...he was on vacation and so it was just me doing everything.” (Interview 1, p. 32). He continued, “Everything wasn’t great because we had so much stuff to do...we were behind on some contracts...that I had

to tackle. I had had to talk to truck drivers...It was a very interesting dynamic to learn the negotiations...[because] you're talking to 50-year-old dudes and you're 22." (Interview 1, pp. 36-37). He highlighted the seriousness of the situation, "We were behind on things, and we had to get the mills feed or else turkeys would die." (Interview 1, p. 38).

On the other hand, by performing challenging tasks, the graduates perceived their confidence improved and their identity shifted to 'worker'. Jenna, the accountant, described the epiphany she had after her first work presentation. "I was able to present in front of my colleagues and senior leaders at headquarters. That was like, 'Wow, I can talk about the business' ...that's a big difference between...doing work...and presenting on the work."(Interview 1, p14).

Exposure to various business units in rapid succession helped the graduates gain a realistic preview of the organization. In retrospect, Carson appreciated the variety of the program's experiences. "Any success that I've had is probably attributed to just baptism by fire, the position I chose, in the location that I chose. I got to learn a lot of things quickly." (Interview 1, p. 19). Although some of these tasks were difficult to experience, once participants completed the challenging tasks, their overall confidence grew, and they began to identify primarily as workers.

Conclusions/Limitations/Recommendations

Participants in this bounded system valued their cohorts as a built-in friend group and appreciated face-to-face meetings as well as special exposure to executives. These findings are consistent with Shore et al., (2010) who found that supervisory support, organizational diversity and perceptions of inclusion predicted job satisfaction. Moreover, participants recognized the benefits of the rich experiences they gained in their leadership development programs and built confidence by facing manageable challenges. As theorized by Vygotsky (1978) and Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), to promote learning and confidence, organizations need to design work tasks for new hires that are challenging but within reach. In this light, faculty should advise students to embrace challenges as opportunities to learn. Participants also expressed loneliness and difficulty making friends due to rotating locations and time demands of the job which impeded their school-to-work transition and made them consider leaving work or to decline promotions. Since establishing connections is a healthy and adaptive means of coping with life (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Blustein, 2001) faculty and advisors should encourage graduates to develop support systems in and outside of work for a smoother school-to-work transition. Moreover, this study highlighted successful pathways for the school-to-work transition included high impact practices (HIPs) as defined by George Kuh (2008) such as internships and studying abroad. Thus, universities should consider integrating HIPs into curricular requirements.

The findings of this study are not generalizable beyond the bounds of this case. Some limitations of this study include there were only three participants and interviews were conducted over Zoom. However, transferable lessons may be learned from perspectives of these participants.

Further exploration of leadership development programs is warranted. For example, a study examining the leadership development graduates' transition out of the program into their permanent roles and a longitudinal study of their long-term career trajectory to better understand if these programs are truly the fast-track opportunities they are perceived to be is merited.

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