

Examining the Perceptions and Preparation Strategies of Minnesota FFA State Officer Candidates

Joe Ramstad, Iowa State University
Lavyne Rada, Lakes Country Service Cooperative
Scott Smalley, Iowa State University
Eleora Mathiowetz, Ashby Public Schools

Introduction and Literature Review

The mission of the National FFA Organization is driven by the goal of developing premier leadership within students (National FFA Organization, 2024). FFA members pursue several leadership positions to help them develop their leadership capacities and capacity to serve. As a national organization, state FFA associations are charged with electing state-level officers, who play a significant role in facilitating more localized experiences that the six national FFA officers would not otherwise be able to provide. State officers may find themselves engaging in activities such as state conferences, planning state FFA conventions, conducting chapter visits, assisting with sponsorship and partnership outreach, and much more (Anderson & Kim, 2009; Minnesota FFA Association, 2025). While there has been research examining leadership within the classroom (Morgan et al., 2013), leadership with FFA members (Kagay et al., 2015; McKim et al., 2017; Ricketts et al., 2004; Rosch et al., 2015), and the desire to be involved in the organization after high school (Sanok et al., 2015), little work has examined perceptions of individuals vying for state FFA office. Hoover and Atwater (2005) examined the preparation efforts of national FFA officer candidates and found that candidates most commonly focused their efforts on understanding FFA issues. The 44 candidates' efforts were guided by conducting interviews with AFNR specialists (84.1%), studying content knowledge (75.0%), and interviews with state department of agriculture leaders (72.7%). Further, the most training and preparation was directed toward building their impromptu abilities (52.3%), eye contact (50.0%), situational adaptation (50.0%), and speech clarity and conciseness (47.7%). States who ensured candidates focused their efforts on developing skill sets in interviewing through conducting mock interview situations with a variety of stakeholders and spending time refining their own vision, creativity, and memory skills were found to be the most electable (Hoover & Atwater, 2005). However, Hoover and Atwater's (2005) study examined their skill development throughout the preparation process, rather than their perceptions of the process, revealing a critical gap in the literature.

Theoretical Framework

Implicit leadership theory (Lord et al., 1984) was developed to examine how the perceptions and past experiences of an individual shape their own understanding of leadership, and their own perceptions of their personal leadership abilities—essentially constructing their own *prototype* of a leader based on their prior experiences with leadership or leaders they admire. The way leaders demonstrate leadership characteristics can vary from individual to individual (Rush et al., 1977). Likewise, the ways in which others perceive these characteristics can also be highly variable and influence whether or not an individual considers someone to be a true leader. As a result, Lord et al.'s (1984) work determined that individuals evaluate the leadership abilities of an individual based on how they align with their own leadership prototype. While the Minnesota FFA officer selection process evaluates candidates on their own perceived prototype of the skills and competencies needed to be successful as a state officer (Minnesota FFA Association, 2025), individual candidates may perceive their skills and abilities differently. As a result, candidates

have different attitudes on whether these skills and competencies are important based on their prior leadership experiences or interactions with past or current state officers (Lord et al., 1984).

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine Minnesota FFA state officer candidates' perceptions of the selection process, along with their levels of preparation. This purpose was guided by three research objectives:

1. To identify candidates' methods of preparation prior to participating in the process.
2. To identify candidates' perceptions of the competencies and rounds included within the Minnesota FFA state officer selection process.
3. To evaluate relationships between attitudes and perceptions before and after the process.

Methods

An IRB-approved questionnaire consisting of several demographic, Likert-type scale, and multiple-choice items was distributed to a census of 15 2025-2026 Minnesota FFA state officer candidates in March 2025 at a state officer process preparation event, and again in April 2025 at the state officer interviews. We utilized a pre-post model to evaluate changes in attitudes and perceptions throughout their preparations. Each participant agreed to participate using an IRB informed consent form. The questionnaire was distributed to the candidates via Qualtrics. The questionnaire included a series of scales with Cronbach's alphas above the recommended value of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). Scales included: Pintrich et al.'s (1991) intrinsic goal orientation ($\alpha = 0.74$), task value ($\alpha = 0.90$), self-efficacy for learning and performance ($\alpha = 0.93$), and anxiety ($\alpha = 0.80$), Ryan's Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI; 1982) activity perception questionnaire ($\alpha = 0.89$), and Duckworth and Quinn's (2009) short grit scale ($\alpha = 0.83$). The questionnaire was reviewed by a panel of experts, who ensured the items were in alignment with the theoretical framework and the objectives of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Thyer, 2010).

Prior to data analysis, all identifiers, including names, contact information, and schools were removed from the data set. Each participant was assigned an ID number to track responses, and a key was created to organize the ID numbers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). De-identified data were analyzed using SPSS. Statistical processes including a mean weighted discrepancy score (MWDS) calculation following a Borich (1980) assessment model, paired *t*-tests, and descriptive statistics assisted in evaluating objectives. The MWDS is determined by adding all the weighted discrepancy scores for the competency and dividing by the total number of responses. Higher MWDS values imply larger disparities between the perceived importance and the level of ability among participants, suggesting a stronger demand for development (Borich, 1980). Competencies with the largest MWDS are regarded as the utmost objectives for training.

Results

Objective 1 sought to identify candidates' methods of preparation prior to participating in the state officer selection process. State officer candidates intended to use, on average, 7 preparation methods on the pre-questionnaire ($\sigma = 1.25$), compared to actually using only 6 methods ($\sigma = 1.46$). For example, while 100% of candidates had aspirations of working with their agricultural educator ($n = 15$), only 66.7% ($n = 10$) actually involved them in their preparations. Candidates practicing rounds on their own ($n = 15$; 100%) and with a mentor ($n = 14$; 93.3%) were the most commonly reported methods. Table 1 outlines key findings related to Objective 1.

Table 1
Preparation Methods of State FFA Officer Candidates

Preparation method	Pre		Post	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Working with a mentor	14	93.3%	14	93.3%
Working with an agricultural educator (not my own)	8	53.3%	7	46.7%
Working with my agricultural educator	15	100.0%	10	66.7%
Researching agricultural issues	14	93.3%	12	80.0%
Interviewing agricultural leaders or stakeholders	4	26.7%	3	20.0%
Journaling and reflecting	10	66.7%	7	46.7%
Practicing on my own	15	100.0%	15	100.0%
Writing down or recording stories	11	73.3%	10	66.7%
Taking time to pause and invest in myself	14	93.3%	12	80.0%
Other	1	6.7%	1	6.7%

A *t*-test comparing the mean amount of preparation methods between candidates who were elected to the state officer team with those who were not elected was conducted, but did not yield statistically significant results. However, those who were elected to the state officer team reported engaging in slightly more preparation methods in total than those who were not elected. Elected officers reported utilizing an average of 6.17 preparation methods ($\sigma = 1.60$), while those who were not elected reported an average of 5.88 preparation methods ($\sigma = 1.25$).

Objective 2 identified candidates’ perceptions of the competencies and rounds included within the Minnesota FFA state officer selection process. Competencies are used to evaluate candidate skills within specific rounds of the selection process. A Borich (1980) assessment was conducted to evaluate the perceived importance of competencies and rounds evaluated within the process against their perceived ability to perform the competencies and rounds. Each item was evaluated using a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning not important or no ability, and 5 meaning extremely important or strong ability. Overall, while candidates felt they lacked the ability to match the importance of each round, candidates did increase their confidence in their abilities leading up to the interview process, as 6 of the 7 rounds saw decreases in MWDS values. Yet, candidates perceived competencies to be more important than their ability to perform the competencies, resulting in positive MWDS scores for all rounds on the pre-questionnaire, and 6 of the 7 rounds in the post-questionnaire. Table 2 provides a summary of findings.

Table 2
State Officer Candidates’ Perceived Importance and Abilities of Selection Process Rounds

Round	Pre	Post	Change
Introduction	2.08	0.97	-1.11
1-on-1	2.38	3.24	+0.86
Written exam	2.08	-1.62	-3.70
Stand and deliver	4.17	1.30	-2.87
Round robin	5.06	2.60	-3.46
Facilitation	3.87	0.32	-3.55
Personal round	2.98	2.92	-0.06

Similar to the findings presented in Table 2, on the post-questionnaire, only 2 competencies were not negative, but the majority ($n = 22$) of the 34 competencies saw decreased MWDS values from the pre- to the post-questionnaire, indicating greater confidence in candidates' abilities to match the importance of the competencies. Table 3 provides an overview of the findings.

Table 3*State Officer Candidates' MWDS Importance and Abilities of Selection Process Competencies*

Competency	Pre	Post	Change
Demonstrates non-verbal skills when communicating with others	3.02	3.20	+0.18
Displays listening skills when dialoguing with others	3.73	2.56	-1.17
Demonstrates writing skills when communicating with others	-0.29	1.42	+1.71
Demonstrates speaking skills in a variety of settings and audiences	2.38	3.57	+1.19
Demonstrates facilitation skills in a workshop setting	3.87	3.28	-0.59
Demonstrates the ability to work in a team pursuing a common goal	2.27	1.33	-0.94
Demonstrates the acceptance of differing viewpoints	-0.28	0.93	+1.21
Demonstrates the ability to put team before self	0.60	0.00	-0.60
Demonstrates knowledge of issues of agriculture and natural resources	4.33	2.80	-1.53
Demonstrates knowledge of the FFA and its issues	4.60	2.72	-1.88
Demonstrates knowledge of America's education system and its issues	4.40	2.48	-1.92
Demonstrates efficient time management	1.87	0.95	-0.92
Demonstrates organizational skills	0.92	-0.63	-1.55
Demonstrates an ability to plan and prioritize	1.92	0.62	-1.30
Displays reliability, integrity and trust among others	0.96	0.96	0.00
Displays adaptable and flexible characteristics	1.23	0.00	-1.23
Displays a positive attitude	1.95	0.64	-1.31
Displays sincerity and compassion toward others	0.92	-0.64	-1.56
Displays maturity	1.32	0.99	-0.33
Displays coachable, life-long learning tendencies	0.97	1.32	+0.35
Displays a strong work ethic	0.96	0.00	-0.96
Displays self-confidence	1.92	1.92	0.00
Committed to the FFA	0.99	0.66	-0.33
Demonstrates an energetic disposition	1.56	0.60	-0.96
Displays initiative in completing a task	0.92	0.96	+0.04
Supports and motivates FFA members and partners	1.60	0.96	-0.64
Mentors and coaches others	1.26	0.31	-0.95
Committed to member representation	1.28	0.32	-0.96
Demonstrates ability to solve problems	1.56	0.31	-1.25
Demonstrates ability to think critically and conduct research	2.88	0.60	-2.28

Objective 3 evaluated relationships between state officer candidates' attitudes and perceptions before and after the state officer selection process. A paired samples t -test was conducted to evaluate each of the 9 scales described in the methodology before and after the selection process. Overall, the mean values increased for the majority of the scales, with the exception of preparation and anxiety; indicating less preparation being done than initially anticipated, and more anxiety being felt than was felt initially. Table 4 provides an overview of the findings.

Table 4*State Officer Candidates' Perceptions Before and After the State Officer Selection Process*

Scale	<i>df</i>	Mean Diff.	SD Diff.	<i>t</i> -statistic	<i>p</i>	Effect Size
Preparation	14	-1.00	1.41	2.74	0.008*	1.414
Intrinsic goals	14	0.27	0.83	1.24	0.117	0.832
Self-efficacy	14	0.55	0.79	-2.69	0.009*	0.792
Anxiety	14	-0.24	1.32	0.71	0.246	1.316
Enjoyment	14	0.07	0.60	-0.43	0.337	0.597
Value	14	0.30	0.88	-1.30	0.107	0.880
Choice	14	0.18	0.63	-1.13	0.138	0.631
Intrinsic motivation	14	0.18	0.53	-1.32	0.104	0.531
Grit	14	0.13	0.26	-1.99	0.033*	0.260

**Note.* Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study examined Minnesota state officer candidates' perceptions of the selection process, along with their levels of preparation. Objective 1 identified candidates' methods of preparation prior to participating in the state officer selection process. While candidates reported ultimately using fewer preparation methods ($\mu = 7$; $\sigma = 1.25$) than they originally had anticipated ($\mu = 6$; $\sigma = 1.46$), there were no statistically significant differences found in the amount of preparation methods utilized between those who were elected and those who were not elected. Objective 2 identified candidates' perceptions of the competencies and rounds included within the Minnesota FFA state officer selection process. Following the Borich (1980) approach, the greatest discrepancies included demonstrating non-verbal communication, listening, speaking, and facilitation skills, indicating a need for additional training for candidates in these areas (Hoover & Atwater, 2005). In their preparations, candidates became more apprehensive about 1-on-1 interviews but felt more at ease with some of the speaking rounds, including round robin, stand and deliver, and facilitation. Finally, Objective 3 evaluated relationships between candidates' attitudes and perceptions before and after the process. Findings from the paired *t*-test revealed positive, statistically significant relationships in preparation methods ($p = 0.008$), self-efficacy ($p = 0.009$), and grit ($p = 0.033$). This may be attributed to their own discovery on their leadership development journey (Lord et al., 1984) and being able to demonstrate more resilience as they receive feedback from mentors and coaches (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009).

Several recommendations also surfaced from our study. Research recommendations should seek to address this study's limitations. One limitation includes not having candidates measure the amount of time candidates prepared for the process; perhaps candidates used fewer methods than they anticipated, but channeled more time into the fewer methods in their preparations. Further, our study was limited by a small sample size; the study should be conducted again in Minnesota in the future to achieve greater confidence in the findings. Further, a post-post instrument may help us understand leadership perceptions and measure growth that resulted after the process has occurred and see the evolution of each candidate's leadership prototype throughout the process (Lord et al., 1984), especially since a major goal of the process is to develop leaders, not just elect a team of officers (Minnesota FFA Association, 2025). For professional practice, state staff are encouraged to use these findings to plan additional support or resources for candidates to use as they prepare for the process, and to inform training for those who are elected.

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SCHOOL-BASED AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION

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