

Shaping Student Agricultural Leadership Assessment: A Diamond Model Approach

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Introduction

Preparing agriculture students to enter the workforce is of importance to those involved in undergraduate student development (Wilkes & Burns, 2019). This includes providing opportunities to balance technical and leadership-directed development (Morgan et al., 2013). Leadership experts agree that undergraduate agriculture students should identify their leadership assets and growth areas, understand how to leverage strengths, and apply leadership theory to personal models and philosophies (Morgan et al., 2013). However, it can be difficult for students to fully articulate their leadership development, and many associate leadership statuses with position (Shehane et al., 2012).

Leadership education experts have requested meaningful conversations concerning the effectiveness of leadership development curricula and their assessment (Goertzen, 2009). Exploring ways to assess agricultural leadership development in higher education effectively is critical to furthering the conversation about effective leadership instruction and may enhance the workforce preparedness of students entering agriculture careers. This study, as part of a larger study, sought to explore how students view their leadership development via the lens of the Diamond Model for Agricultural Leadership (Lattore, 2021; Leavitt-Hullana et al., 2025).

Conceptual Framework

The Diamond Model (Lattore, 2021; Leavitt-Hullana et al., 2025) was used as a conceptual framework for this study. The model, used to guide agricultural leadership programming in California allows individuals to build their leadership development as they move from their current reality, or current state as an individual, to their future reality, or what they envision for themselves in the future (Lattore, 2021; Leavitt-Hullana et al., 2025; California Agricultural Leadership Foundation, 2025). At its core, feedback and reflection, concerning both skills and inner being, facilitate growth and help overcome fears. Students in agricultural education, leadership, and communication programs are poised to enter the agricultural industry, garnering use of the frame in agricultural leadership development.

Methodology

This qualitative study explored how students view their leadership via the lens of the Diamond Model (Lattore, 2021; Leavitt-Hullana et al., 2025). As a summative assessment, students created a personal Diamond Model as a PowerPoint slide to objectively evaluate their leadership growth in a foundational leadership course at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. Thirteen students opted to participate during Fall 2024, and work samples were downloaded and provided pseudonyms to protect anonymity. Guided by the Diamond Model, deductive coding was used to analyze how students were able to reflect on their leadership development. Codes were categorized and three themes emerged (Saldaña, 2014; 2021). Qualitative rigor and trustworthiness were upheld by the tenets of Lincoln and Guba (1985). We chose not to provide quotes because the data collected consisted of one-word descriptors.

Results and Findings

Disjointed Idealism

Participants identified future goals aligned with leadership topics covered within the course, such as leading with purpose, aligning work/life values, creating meaningful change, and

working in a collaborative work environment. However, these goals were poorly aligned with the current realities that students self-identified. As an assessment tool, the misalignment of beliefs and values can be seen in how participants described their current actions and how they will continue to pursue their future realities. Michelle expressed aspirations of owning a floral business, but was unable to connect their current experiences with the goal.

Reflection Variation

The depth and breadth, or lack thereof, emerged as a characteristic that should be accounted for when using the assessment tool. Students who are able to reflect deeply could consider the importance of confidence, adaptability, communication, self-improvement, and future orientation within their current and future realities. This highlighted the significance of these qualities and how they intertwined with daily actions, leading to a deeper exploration of how participants balanced being and doing within the current and future realities. Jake reflected on how to improve himself through teamwork, flexibility, and kindness, which allowed him to set an example and give back to others. Whereas Haley identified their struggle with confidence, they failed to reflect on ways to improve or how this might affect their overall effectiveness.

Relationships

An emphasis on trusting oneself and others aligned with the felt need to find mentors to guide participants in support of their future realities. Participants recognized the importance of adaptability when working within a team and participation in clubs, organizations, and athletic teams aligned with the need to be part of a team environment in the future. Ultimately, by fostering relationships based on trust, mentorship, and collaborative adaptability, participants are creating a support network to prepare them to tackle today's challenges and pave the way for achieving future ambitions. Erica, like other students, explained she enjoys collaborating with teams who are motivated and share her core values and intentions.

Conclusions

Participants successfully used the Diamond Model (Lattore, 2021; Leavitt-Hullana et al., 2025) to outline their leadership development, describing their current and future realities and identifying skills and areas for growth. Students appeared to lack direction on how they might move through their leadership continuum, and their ability to reflect varies. Further, students see relationships as important and are attentive to value alignment when considering relationships.

Implications/Recommendations

Mumford et al. (2000) posited creative problem-solving, knowledge, and social judgment, as three leadership skills necessary for addressing the complexities prevalent in our changing global landscape. In considering the complex problems agriculture faces, approaches to agriculture student leadership development, including the use of the Diamond Model, should focus on the capacity for engaging in complicated issues. Practitioners in higher-education leadership development spaces in agriculture should focus on helping students develop clear plans and capitalize on skills and talents to foster self-actualization. Opportunities for regular student reflection dovetail with the idea of deepening student thoughtfulness concerning their next steps (Rolfe, 2002; Schön, 1992). Research should focus on identifying the specific gaps and shortcomings preventing students from being able to articulate how to move forward, as well as explorations of how students navigate relationships in instances where values are not aligned.

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