

Youth Leadership Development: A National Analysis of FFA Member Role and Activity Context

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Abstract

A purpose of youth organizations is to develop leadership skills among members through organizational structure and organization sponsored activities. But do they develop those skills? This national, multi-stage study examined the role of youth and the context of their activities in developing leadership in rural FFA chapters. FFA members had a higher level of agreement with statements indicating that activities focused on self-development and the lowest agreement with statements focused on the community. FFA members indicated that in their interactions with adults they were most likely to be treated as partners. It follows that in the role-context matrix, the strongest agreement with statements regarding their interaction with adults and the dimension of leadership development was in developing self in a partnership role with adults. Youth leadership activities should help youth gain skills that help them understand self, interact with others, function effectively in groups, and provide leadership within the community.

Introduction

Leadership skills of FFA members and youth organization activities have been widely examined. These studies have examined either the degree to which youth have acquired particular leadership life skills or the level within the organization at which the members have participated in leadership activities. Little attention has been paid to either the role of the young person in relation to the adults in the development of leadership, nor the context in which the leadership behaviors in developing leadership skills have been explored. Research has suggested that the most effective leadership development programs engage young people in

meaningful ways as they work as partners with adults in addressing real world situations to become active community leaders (Brennan, Barnett, & Lesmeister, 2006).

Literature Review

Boyd (2001) identifies a distinction between youth leadership and other youth development programming. Youth leadership programs offer young people opportunities to: (a) participate actively in the planning, decision-making, and implementation of the programs in which they participate; B) engage in frequent and regular contact with adults who model responsible behavior, and provide ongoing validation and support for youth's active involvement; and (c) develop skills such as brainstorming, decision-making, setting goals, and working with others.

Youth are playing an increasingly important role in development of their communities (Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002). In fact, by empowering youth to become full partners in the community, they will become more invested in long-term participation and contribution to community programs (Barnett & Brennan, 2006). Additionally, youth, adults, schools, organizations, and communities may all potentially benefit from a greater investment in youth as they become engaged in leadership roles within their community (Larson, Wilson, & Mortimer, 2006).

One youth organization, the National FFA, says its mission "is dedicated to making a positive difference in the lives of young people by developing their potential for *premier leadership, personal growth* and *career success* through agricultural education" (National FFA Organization, 2005). Several researchers (Townsend & Carter, 1983; Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997) have found a positive relationship between leadership skills scores and FFA participation.

Research supports Agricultural Education and the FFA impact on the success of the local community and development of community leaders. These community leaders who participated in agricultural education felt their leadership activities were effective in developing their leadership skills, contributed to their success, and increased value to their careers regardless of their occupations (Brannon, Holley, & Key, 1989). Balschweid and Talbert (2000) reported that youth who were FFA members were more engaged in school and community activities and career preparations than either non-members or typical high school students. Scales and Leffert (1999) stated that youth organizations provide opportunities for success, a sense of belonging and safety, activities that are challenging,

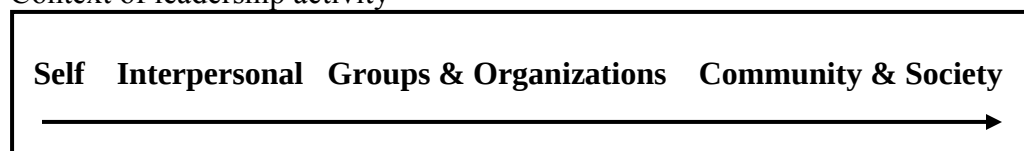
interaction and support from adults, leadership opportunities, and other interactions that contribute to the positive development and resiliency of youth.

Context of Leadership Activities

How do we develop leadership in youth or adults? Curricula in most leadership programs focus on the context of the educational experiences as the emphasis moves from self to community. Modules or lessons address topics which broaden the participants perspective and develop skills moving from understanding yourself and your personal strengths and weaknesses to developing knowledge and skills related to working with others and ultimately to the leadership skills associated with public policy and the common good.

Ayres (1987) identified four key developmental phases through which individuals engaged in a leadership curriculum should progress (see Figure 1). First individuals must develop an expanded knowledge of self, that is, who they are, what they believe, and how they function. Next they move toward mastering skills necessary to work effectively with others. In the next phase, individuals refine their skills working with groups or organizations. The final phase focuses on leadership within the context of communities, systems, and society. As the arena in which leadership is being practiced continues to broaden, individuals must use knowledge and skills learned at previous levels to be effective in the new context.

Figure 1
Context of leadership activity



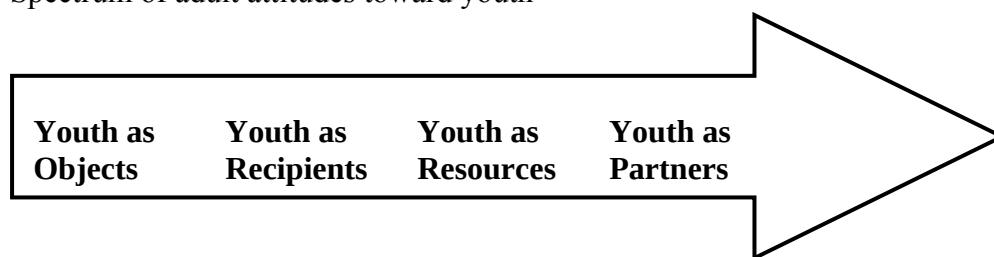
The components of the Ayres (1987) model are frequently addressed in leadership development programs. Developing an understanding of oneself is included as a module in most curricula for leadership development. Other concepts include the knowledge and skill related to interpersonal communication and the ability to participate in and understand group development and dynamics, working together to achieve goals and dealing with conflict. Ultimately, leadership development curricula will focus beyond self and groups to the community at large. How to serve the common good beyond individual or organization is an element of leadership development programs.

Role of Youth in Society

The development of leadership skills in youth is the focus of many school and community based youth organizations including the FFA, FCCLA, 4-H, and Scouting. The sponsor or advisor is responsible for guiding activities and events in which youth engage. The role of youth in the adult-youth relationship will vary greatly and have a significant influence on the development of leadership among youth.

Lofquist (1989) developed what he termed a “spectrum of attitudes” that adults may hold regarding the role of young people in society. The left side of his continuum (Figure 2) represents an attitude where young people are viewed as “objects,” being told what to do because the adult “knows what’s best” for the youth. As “recipients” young people participate in learning experiences that adults see as “being good for them.” However, the real contributions of young people are seen as being deferred until some later date and learning experiences are seen as practice for later life. When youth are viewed as “resources,” actions of young people have present value to the community and there is an attitude of respect focusing on building self-esteem and being productive. The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development (2001) later added a characterization of youth as “partners” to Lofquist’s original continuum. As partners youth share leadership and decision-making roles with adults.

Figure 2
Spectrum of adult attitudes toward youth

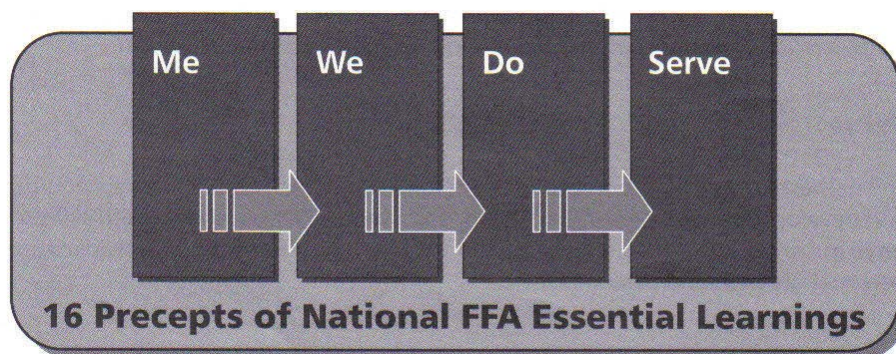


The view that adults take toward young people tends to shape the nature of the leadership programs they design. In some programs, leadership is taught through formal routines that emphasize command and compliance. The leader is *in charge* and followers are objects to be directed. In other programs, youth run club meetings and organize events as practice for more significant roles in the community later in life. In these instances youth are recipients of programs designed by well-meaning adults. When programs involve young people as resources, youth grow, gaining knowledge, skills and building self-esteem from

their involvement in service learning activities such as food drives and community clean-up campaigns while performing needed functions within their community. More recently, youth have been engaged as full partners with adults in making decisions and taking actions aimed at producing sustainable and vibrant communities.

In 2004, the National FFA Organization introduced a national leadership curriculum, LifeKnowledge. This curriculum's foundation is the 16 Precepts of National FFA Essential Learnings (see Figure 3). These precepts focus around four key areas building on the area of Me, We, Do, and Serve. Developed by leadership experts, teacher educators, agricultural education teachers and agriculture industry leaders, these align very closely to the Ayres Context of Leadership Activities Theory (1987).

Figure 3
Precepts of the National FFA Essential Learnings

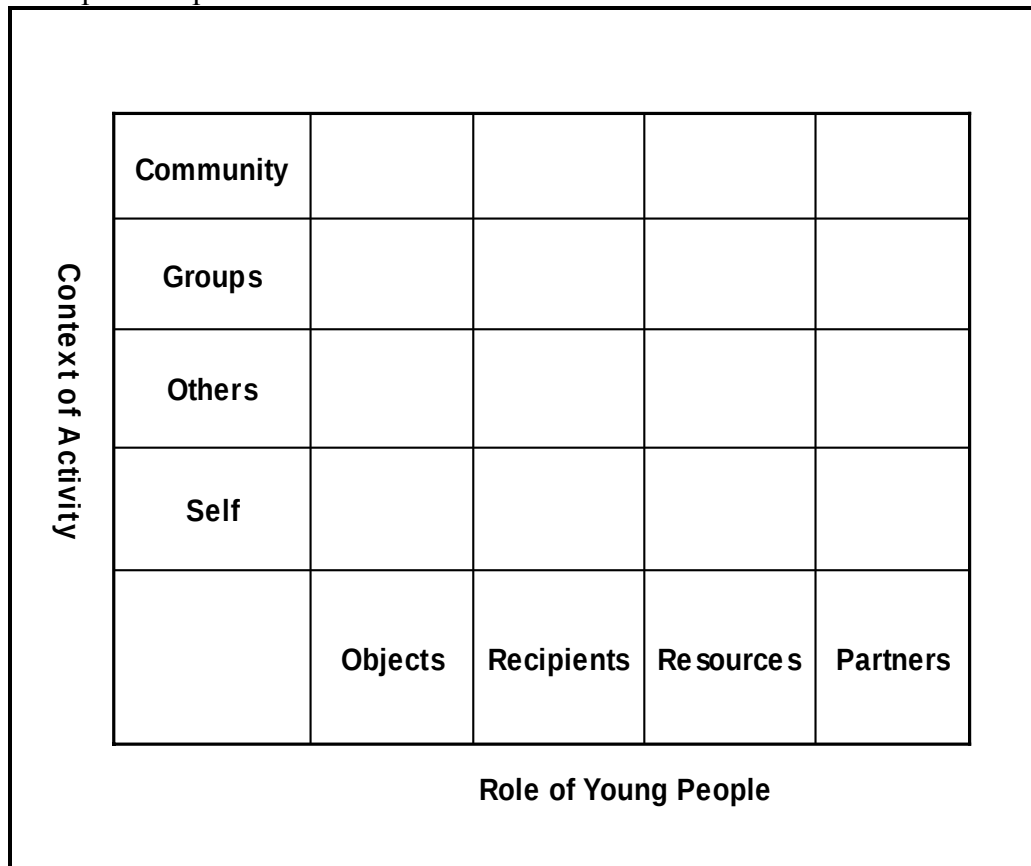


With the implementation of the LifeKnowledge Leadership Curriculum, leaders in the National FFA Organization wanted to identify members' perceptions of their role in planning and execution of chapter activities and the community context of these youth leadership activities.

Theoretical Framework

The Theoretical Framework for this study merged the Lofquist (1989) and Ayres (1987) theories as created by Peiter, Nall, and Rennekamp (2005). Displayed in Figure 4, this theory examines the relationship between the context of leadership activities and the role of youth in the youth leadership experiences.

Figure 4
Conceptual map for theoretical framework



Purpose/Objectives

The overall purpose of this study is to describe and map the context of leadership activities and the role of rural FFA members. Specific objectives of the study include:

- Examine the demographics of rural FFA members.
- Describe the context in which FFA chapter leadership activities are performed.
- Describe the role of FFA members in youth-adult interaction at the chapter level.
- Identify the strength between member role and context of leadership activities.

Methods

The target population for this descriptive study was rural members of the National FFA Organization. For the purposes of this study, rural members were identified as those living in geographic regions containing no city or town larger than ten thousand residents. A multi-stage cluster sampling technique was conducted to draw a representative sample of active FFA members from across the United States. In the first stage, three states were randomly selected from each of the four National FFA regions (12 states). In the second stage of the sampling procedure, state FFA advisors were given a specific formula to ensure random selection of the four FFA chapters in that state, representing a FFA chapter in a rural community.

A researcher developed instrument was created for the purpose of collecting data regarding youth participation in leadership activities. The context of youth activities were identified by developing statements which reflect the potential roles FFA members engage in as they develop leadership skills moving from personal development to interpersonal development to organizational and group development to ultimately engaging in community and societal leadership (Ayers, 1987). Roles of youth in adult-youth relationships through leadership activities were also examined. Questions were developed which reflected the role in which FFA members were engaged through leadership activities which viewed them as objects, recipients, resources, or partners (Lofquist, 1989).

Researchers created a matrix integrating the context of leadership development in relationship to the roles of youth in the leadership activities conducted by FFA chapters. Four questions were developed for each cell of the 16 cell matrix. Each question related specifically to the member role and context of activity. For example, a cell 1 statement representing Self and Objects was “In my FFA Chapter....New members must participate in initiation activities.” In contrast, cell 16 represents Community and Partners. A specific statement in this cell read “In my FFA Chapter...Members work side by side with local citizens in planning, conducting and evaluating meaningful community projects.” A total of 64 questions were developed in this instrument, corresponding to the 16 quadrants of the role-context matrix.

Each question began with the statement, “In my FFA Chapter...” and through responses FFA members measured their current state of leadership activities. Responses were measured using a four point Likert-type scale, based on 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree. Validity and reliability of this instrument was established. Content and face validity of the

instrument was established using a panel of experts. These experts were in the field of leadership development, current agricultural education teachers serving on the National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE) Board of Directors, University Extension staff, agricultural education pre-service teachers, and former FFA members. The instrument was pilot tested with high school FFA members not included in the random sample. Reliability was established using Chronbach's Alpha and was reported for each construct specializing in leadership context of activity and member role. Scores included: Objects ($\alpha = .71$), Recipients ($\alpha = .85$), Resources ($\alpha = .88$), Partners ($\alpha = .86$), Self ($\alpha = .72$), Interpersonal ($\alpha = .88$), Groups ($\alpha = .88$), and Community ($\alpha = .88$).

After receiving approval from the Human Subjects Review Board, permission was granted by the FFA advisor and school administrator for their students to participate in the study. Dillman (2000) research design method was incorporated; therefore 48 FFA chapter advisors were notified of the opportunity to participate prior to the first mailing. Follow-up contacts were made with non-respondent FFA chapters. Each advisor went through training by the researcher to properly administer the survey instrument to every FFA member in the chapter. This process resulted in 1202 respondents from 36 FFA chapters (75% response rate). Research data were analyzed using SPSS 10.0 and descriptive statistics of frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were reported.

Findings

The first objective focused on the personal characteristics of rural FFA members (see Table 1). Over half of the respondents were male ($n = 638$, 54.86%). Of those who reported ethnicity, 940 (83.63%) were white. Five percent ($n = 57$, 5.07%) were black, and 57 (5.07%) reported their ethnicity as Hispanic. Approximately two and a half percent were Asian ($n = 27$, 2.40%) and nearly three percent ($n = 33$, 2.94%) of the respondents indicated their ethnicity as other.

In terms of level of education, nearly one-third of FFA members were high school freshman ($n = 360$, 30.93%). Approximately one-fourth of the respondents were sophomores ($n = 296$, 25.43%), 19.59% ($n = 228$) were juniors, 16.15% ($n = 188$) reported being seniors, and 92 (7.90%) of the respondents were in Middle School. Four hundred seventy four (42.02%) were first year members of FFA, and 22.96% ($n = 259$) were second year members. Sixteen percent had been members for three years ($n = 190$, 16.84%), 135 (11.97%) had been members for 4 years, and 4.26% ($n = 48$) had been FFA members for 5 years. Finally, 52 (4.61%) respondents reported being a FFA member for six years. In terms of leadership positions in the FFA, 278 (23.74%) of the respondents reported serving as a

chapter officer, while over three-fourths ($n = 893$, 76.26%) had not held an office in their FFA chapter.

Table 1
Personal characteristics of rural FFA members

	Rural FFA Members ($n = 1202$)	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Gender ($n = 1163$)		
Male	638	54.86
Female	525	45.14
Ethnicity ($n = 1124$)		
White, Non-Hispanic	940	83.63
Black, Non-Hispanic	57	5.07
Hispanic	57	5.07
Asian	27	2.40
Other	33	2.94
Grade in School ($n = 1164$)		
Middle School	92	7.90
Freshman	360	30.93
Sophomore	296	25.53
Junior	228	19.59
Senior	188	16.15
Years in FFA ($n = 1128$)		
1	474	42.02
2	259	22.96
3	190	16.84
4	135	11.97
5	48	4.62
6	52	4.61
Chapter Officer ($n = 1171$)		
Yes	278	23.73
No	893	76.26

The second objective described the context (Self, Interpersonal, Groups, Community) in which leadership activities are performed (see Table 2). There was the greatest agreement of respondents that FFA activities focused on personal self development ($M = 3.01$). Members viewed activities resulting in interpersonal development ($M = 2.92$) as the second highest. Leadership activities resulting in skills related to group development ($M = 2.90$) followed. Community/Society

Development leadership activities were perceived as the area of least involvement ($M = 2.88$).

Table 2
Context in which leadership activities are performed

	Rural FFA Members ($n = 1202$)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Personal Development/Self	3.01	.520
Interpersonal	2.92	.530
Groups	2.90	.528
Community	2.88	.599

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree

The third objective described the role of youth (Objects, Recipients, Resources, Partners) in leadership activities (see Table 3). FFA members viewed themselves as partners ($M = 2.99$) to a greater degree than any of the other roles. Following very closely, ($M = 2.97$) youth identified their role with adults as a resource. FFA members viewed their role with adults in leadership activities as recipients ($M = 2.88$) and objects ($M = 2.87$) less than they viewed their roles as partners and resources.

Table 3
Describe the role of youth in leadership activities

	Rural FFA Members ($n = 1202$)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Objects	2.87	.515
Recipients	2.88	.507
Resources	2.97	.534
Partners	2.99	.548

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree

Objective four identified the strength between member role and the context of the chapter leadership activities. Figure 5 shows how FFA members perceived their role in leadership activities related to the context. For example, the cell community partners ($M = 2.91$) represents the respondents agreement that they were partners with adults in the activities focusing on community development. When members identified the role and context of their leadership involvement, the strength was in chapter activities focusing on self development where the role was as a partner ($M = 3.07$).

The next strongest level of agreement was tied. Respondents indicated that in the context of self development activities, their roles as recipient and resources were viewed with the same level of agreement ($M = 3.03$). Members responded they had the least agreement with statements indicating their role was objects in the context of group development ($M = 2.79$).

Figure 5

Matrix showing intersection of youth role and activity context

Context of Activity	Community	2.82	2.85	2.95	2.91
	Groups	2.97	2.84	3.01	2.99
	Others	2.93	2.80	2.90	3.01
	Self	2.94	3.03	3.03	3.07
		Objects	Recipients	Resources	Partners
Role of Young People					

1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree

FFA members responded to statements which identified the relationship between the roles of youth in leadership activities within the leadership context (see Table 4). Means and standard deviations were expressed for each group of statements in the role-context matrix. The standard deviations showing the greatest variance were all related to the context of leadership in the community ($SD = 7.12$, $SD =$

6.96, $SD = 6.94$). Standard deviations showing the least variance was in the context of groups ($SD = 5.98$). However, the next four cells with the lowest variance was in the context of developing self ($SD = 6.05$, $SD = 6.11$, $SD = 6.22$, $SD = 6.22$). It should be noted this is consistent with the mean scores for self as reported in Figure 5.

Table 4
Means of role and context matrix

	Rural FFA Members ($n = 1202$)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Objects and Self	2.94	.611
Objects and Others	2.93	.647
Objects and Groups	2.79	.666
Objects and Community	2.82	.694
Recipients and Self	3.03	.622
Recipients and Others	2.80	.679
Recipients and Groups	2.84	.598
Recipients and Community	2.85	.712
Resources and Self	3.03	.622
Resources and Others	2.90	.647
Resources and Groups	3.01	.648
Resources and Community	2.95	.666
Partners and Self	3.07	.605
Partners and Others	3.01	.664
Partners and Groups	2.99	.670
Partners and Community	2.91	.696

1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree

Conclusions/Recommendations/Implications

Youth in this youth leadership organization tended to be white males, high school freshmen with one year of membership in FFA. In addition, few held a chapter office (less than 25% were officers at the local level). Further analysis of data should compare gender, grade level, years of FFA membership, and leadership experiences. Further research studies should examine the role of youth in youth-adult interactions and the context of leadership development in FFA activities with upper classmen and experienced FFA leaders.

In the context of FFA activities, as members moved through the continuum (activities focusing on self development, interpersonal skills, groups, and community) agreement decreased in each area. It is recommended leadership development activities continue to occur. Emphasis should be given to help young

people gain skills that help them better understand self and interact with others. National FFA should incorporate programs that emphasize effectively working in groups and provide leadership development opportunities within the community. This may be accomplished through activities such as civic engagement and service learning.

Youth leaders in FFA chapters recognize the focus on their own personal development in leadership activities. However results from this study imply these youth have not been given the opportunity for community and group development experiences. Because of the educational level and years of experience in FFA indicated by the demographic data, researchers can not conclude chapters are not developing the higher level of leadership skills in context of groups and community. Future research should examine how the demographic variables impact the context of leadership activities and the role of youth with adults.

In examining the role of youth in youth-adult interactions, FFA members view themselves as partners to a greater degree than any of the other roles. As they move through the youth-adult interaction continuum, (view youth's role as objects, resources, recipients, and partners by adults) their agreement with the statements as their role strengthens. FFA chapters should continue to design activities that engage youth as objects, recipients, resources, and partners in an age-appropriate manner. Further research should be conducted to examine the FFA advisors' role in developing members' leadership skills and in their role in their youth-adult interaction.

FFA members indicate through their leadership activities, they experience positive roles in youth-adult interactions. The strongest agreement was in being treated as partners in the self development activities. FFA members believe that in all roles (Objects, Recipients, Resources and Partners) they have the least experience as it relates to community. The development of more activities focusing on community civic engagement will strengthen leadership of members.

Further analysis of the data should investigate if differences exist for demographic characteristics and geographic location (FFA regions). Examining role of youth and context of leadership activities by each area will provide additional information. Programs could be developed to increase the role of youth and leadership activities, therefore benefiting FFA members.

This study should be replicated to evaluate FFA member perceptions of youth-adult interactions and context of leadership activities over time. As the LifeKnowledge curriculum is introduced to agricultural education students across

the country, researchers should examine the effect of this curriculum on leadership development. In addition, it is recommended to conduct focus group interviews with chapter leaders to further define and clarify the degree of involvement in their roles and the context of the activities. This will provide qualitative data to further explore implications to this study.

Ultimately, leadership educators must examine the role of youth in youth-adult partnerships for community based activities when teaching youth leadership development. Furthermore, community-based civic engagement activities in youth organizations (4-H, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, etc.) should be promoted and effectiveness of leadership activities assessed in terms of this framework. In addition, leadership educators must address issues of the role of youth and the context of leadership activities with adult leaders who mentor youth members in these youth leadership organizations. Further research should be conducted to examine perceptions of leadership educators and adult staff and volunteers who work directly with various youth leadership organizations.

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Biography

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