

Leadership Competencies Developed During a Short-Term Domestic Study Tour: An Exploration of Participants' Perceptions

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Abstract

As short-term study abroad tours seek to develop globally competent leaders within the agricultural industry, the rich diversity present within the United States has led to the inception of short-term domestic study tours. To improve how global leadership competencies are developed among adolescent participants, understanding competencies gained during short-term international and domestic cultural immersion trips is vital. This case study analysis sought to explore state FFA officer perceptions of leadership competencies developed through participation in the National FFA Organization's International Leadership Seminar for State Officers (ILSSO) which pivoted to a domestic study tour for 2022. The findings indicate participants perceived agricultural exposure and networking with peers as the development of leadership competencies. Participants also expressed perspective shifts around agricultural production methods and varied cultural experiences in the state of California. Recommendations include designing leadership curriculum for both short-term abroad and domestic tours with a framework grounded in leadership theory and replicating this study to compare findings in various contexts. Similar studies should also be conducted to assess outcomes of leadership development programs designed by the National FFA Organization.

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Introduction and Problem Statement

Globalization is an integral component of the agricultural, food, fiber, and natural resources (AFNR) industry, increasing the need for developing leadership competencies within a global context (Deardorff, 2006; Landon et al., 2017). Specifically, there is a need to expose young people to global experiences within AFNR (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2021). Higher education institutions offer many opportunities for student participation in faculty-led, short-term study abroad (STSA) programs within the context of agriculture (Hendrickson, 2015; Vetter & Wingenbach, 2019). Many STSA programs available to students in agriculture are designed to develop cultural awareness, build understanding of social responsibilities to society, gain technical knowledge within various agricultural industries, and foster personal growth (Bunch et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2013; Vetter & Wingenbach, 2019).

With barriers such as finances or reservations about international travel preventing students from participating in STSA programs, it is questioned whether domestic study tours designed to meet the same objectives as a STSA produce similar meaningful outcomes (Gomez-Lanier, 2017; Sobania & Braskamp, 2009). Traveling abroad is not always necessary for a cross-cultural experience, as increased diversity within the United States provides rich opportunities (Sobania & Braskamp, 2009). Promoting cultural understanding, expanding personal worldview, and gaining understanding in one's field of study can also be accomplished through domestic experiences (Gomez-Lanier, 2017; Sobania & Braskamp, 2009). However, little literature exists exploring the development of leadership competencies during a short-term domestic study tour (Radford, 2020); therefore, the need exists to study these experiences. Further investigation of the educational outcomes of domestic study tours could provide evidence of their viability as an alternative to STSA that has fewer barriers.

Conceptual Framework

Two conceptual frameworks, social capital (Coleman, 1988) and global perspective (Hanvey, 1982), were utilized inductively to illuminate meaning in the findings. Social capital refers to the resources and benefits we may receive from relationships within a social structure (Coleman, 1988). Within social structures, social capital can be depicted among its three main forms: obligations and expectations (i.e., trustworthiness among members of the group), information channels (i.e., acquisition of information through social relations), and social norms (i.e., beliefs and standards that guide or constrain behaviors; Coleman, 1988).

Hanvey (1982) outlined five dimensions of a global perspective that could be attained by young people through formal and informal education. These five dimensions include (a) perspective consciousness, (b) 'state of the planet' awareness, (c) cross-cultural awareness, (d) knowledge of global dynamics, and (e) awareness of choices (Hanvey, 1982). Cross-cultural awareness is the ability to acknowledge and empathize with diverse ideas and practices from around the globe, and also recognize how the ideas and norms of one's own society may compare and be viewed by another (Hanvey, 1982). It has been found that the development of social capital is

one primary motivator for students to engage in study abroad experiences, along with career preparation and global knowledge development (Roberts et al., 2020). Within a short-term domestic study tour, participants value the connections made with fellow participants to better develop themselves personally and professionally creating a high-impact learning experience (Homeyer et al., 2017). Therefore, the social capital and global perspective frameworks were selected as lenses through which we investigated this study to determine if similar outcomes hold true in domestic experiences in agricultural settings. Moreover, the need for AFNR workforce prospects to participate in experiences that build social networks, global perspectives, and other leadership skills has been emphasized by industry stakeholders and university faculty (NASEM, 2021).

Purpose

Each year the National FFA Organization hosts an International Leadership Seminar for State Officers (ILSSO) abroad, which is attended by state FFA officers. Participants of ILSSO will be able to demonstrate knowledge of global values and diversity, create a plan to articulate and interpret learning to constituents, and formulate empathy and awareness of domestic and global conditions through a facilitated immersion experience. The 2022 ILSSO experience was planned to take place in Costa Rica in January. However, due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, the destination of the trip pivoted domestically to California, resulting in a short-term domestic study tour in lieu of traveling abroad for that year. For 10 days, participants traveled to various agricultural operations across the state of California, met with industry leaders, and engaged in facilitated reflection at the end of each evening with a small group of fellow participants. The purpose of this study was to explore participants' perceptions of leadership competencies developed through participation in a short-term domestic study tour, a modification of ILSSO. One research question guided the investigation: What leadership competencies did participants perceive they developed through the ILSSO experience?

Methods

The qualitative case study approach was selected for this study (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). This single case was bound by time, location, and participants of the 2022 ILSSO experience. When studying this case, the researchers focused on the participants' perceived leadership competencies developed as a result of participating in the ILSSO experience.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to identify study participants (Creswell, 2013), who were college-aged students elected to serve as state FFA officers within their respective states and attended ILSSO in January 2022 ($N = 46$). Consent and assent were obtained for 42 participants. The research participants represented 17 U.S. states. A majority of the participants self-identified as female ($n = 28$), with the remaining self-identifying as male ($n = 14$).

Data Collection and Analysis

Case study research requires an in-depth analysis of the case through the inclusion of several sources of data for analysis and triangulation (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). Sources of data included (a) pre-experience reflection statements, (b) post-experience reflection statements, (c) deferred post-experience focus group interviews, (d) researcher observations, (e) captioned photos, and (f) trip artifacts and documents. Forty-two participants completed pre- and post-experience statements which were hand-written by participants and transcribed electronically by the researchers. Six focus group interviews occurred three months post-experience via Zoom with 18 participants total. Auto-generated transcripts via Zoom were verified by the researchers. Observations were conducted by one researcher who attended the experience and kept journal notes. Captioned photos were collected via Qualtrics submission at the end of the experience. Primary data (pre- and post-experience statements and focus groups) were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The process began with open coding, where line-by-line analysis was conducted by one researcher to establish a set of open codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The open codes were then discussed, negotiated, and condensed, by the research team. All other sources of data were used for data triangulation. Finally, four themes were confirmed by the researchers.

Rigor, Trustworthiness, and Researcher Reflexivity

The considerations for establishing qualitative rigor and trustworthiness recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were used: (a) credibility, (b) confirmability, (c) dependability, and (d) transferability. Specific practices included researcher and data triangulation (Creswell, 2013), researcher audit trailing, multiple data checks that led to inter-coder agreement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), reflective bracketing to minimize researcher biases (Tufford & Newman, 2010), the inclusion of reflexive statements (Ary et al., 2010; Tracy, 2010), and the presentation of rich data descriptions (Stake, 1978). To accurately present the findings of this study, biases, context, and the experience must be properly acknowledged to uphold the sincerity and quality of research (Tracy, 2010). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ILSSO experience pivoted from abroad to a domestic experience and encountered many unforeseen itinerary changes during the trip. As a result, participants in this study are not reflective of the entirety of ILSSO participants since the program's inception. Also, the lack of context available with the qualitative content analysis of pre- and post-trip statements limited the depth of understanding and interpretation of meaning of participants' experiences. Each of the three members of the research team participated in an abroad ILSSO experience previously as student participants and were familiar with the program. One faculty member of the research team was invited by the National FFA Organization to lead the 2022 ILSSO experience as a trip chaperone.

Findings

Four emergent themes were revealed through the data related to perceived leadership competencies developed during the ILSSO short-term domestic study tour: (a) *expanded relationships with fellow participants*, (b) *conflation of gained industry and technical exposure*

as a leadership competency, (c) changed perspectives on agricultural production methods, and (d) varied perspectives of cultural experiences.

Theme #1: Expanded Relationships with Fellow Participants

Participants expressed their disappointment when the location of the trip moved from Costa Rica to California but continued to see it as an opportunity for expansion of relationships with fellow participants. Many of the National FFA Organization's largest events for state FFA officers were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic; as a result, participants wanted to attend ILSSO because they missed out on the ability to interact and network with each other during the year. Participants expressed networking with other state FFA officers is mutually beneficial as they continue involvement in the National FFA Organization, grow in their collegiate careers, and eventually move into the professional world. One participant summarized the sentiments communicated by many others writing, "I had the chance to network with industry professionals and other state officers and create those lifelong connections." Having conversations and building friendships with fellow state FFA officers was one of participants' biggest takeaways from the trip. When discussing the most impactful learning experiences during ILSSO in focus groups, one participant, Nick, stated, "Just the friendships and the relationships really laid the groundwork to have some really vulnerable but intentional and really fulfilling conversations." Another participant, Josh, echoed a sentiment shared by most participants:

I think for me personally, the most impactful learning experience came from conversations with people whether that was the other individuals on the trip or the producers we met and just kind of realizing impact can come from all directions.

Three months after the ILSSO experience participants in focus groups expressed they were continuing to maintain the friendships developed in California through social media and phone calls. Jessica felt supported by her fellow participants even after the trip and shared her experience by saying, "My dad passed away unexpectedly [after ILSSO] and almost everyone reached out to me at some point ... It solidified that making those connections that will last forever is just one of the best feelings in the world."

Small group discussions facilitated by the adult chaperones and informal conversations were most valued by participants and seen as opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with one another and process information learned on the trip together. However, one participant believed more intentional facilitated discussions could have enriched and brought more meaning to the experience. Shania wrote:

Personally, I would have valued some more intense debriefings in small group with deeper curriculum. I believe there was room for a deeper dive into the issues facing the industry and discussing the relevance of the tours in small group. Personally, I did a lot of self-reflection to bring those things to fruition, but could have been pushed more by facilitators in the future.

There was an apparent expectation of networking, reflecting on the experience with fellow state FFA officers, and interpersonal discovery in relation to small group discussions.

Theme #2: Conflation of Gained Industry and Technical Exposure as a Leadership Competency

Through farm tours in California, participants were exposed to a variety of agricultural operations and production methods such as caviar and oyster farms, wineries, orchards, cattle feedlots, and operations centered around organic, sustainable, and regenerative practices. Participants shared they became more educated on California agricultural issues and gained valuable experience by observing various agricultural practices and engaging with producers as they shared production methodology. By having the opportunity to interact with the Secretary of Agriculture for the state of California, participants learned how public policy influences agriculture through regulatory action. One participant wrote, “I also learned that policy plays a huge role in the operations of farms in the United States.” Participants hoped to apply the new knowledge they gained when returning home. Josh said, “I have that raw information that I can take and apply and ask intelligent questions or be able to hopefully learn more about that side of the industry [in the future].”

While intelligence is often a characteristic of a leader, leadership development programs do not focus on it as a skill to be developed. Developing a foundational perspective of domestic perspectives in agriculture is one of the main objectives of the ILSSO experience, the program is marketed more widely as a leadership development opportunity for the premiere leaders of the National FFA Organization. With that in consideration, when discussing what leadership competencies participants believed they developed and if the trip had influenced their approach to leadership, participants stated the ILSSO experience did not change their approach to leadership or the way they viewed themselves as leaders. As Crystal said, “I wouldn’t say it’s necessarily changed my approach to leadership.” Nick echoed her statement by saying, “It hasn’t really altered my leadership style or how I see myself as a leader.” One participant expressed not being able to understand why leadership would be a focal point of ILSSO. Peter communicated this sentiment by stating:

I just viewed ILSSO as more of an advocate training and industry development and agricultural development of knowledge ... I just don’t see the need to necessarily draw leadership back into it time and time again. [Sic] even thinking about the international experience, [sic] if we’re trying to develop leaders on this trip [sic] or develop leadership competencies, [sic] and you’re touring different places and you have adult leaders, how exactly are you exemplifying leadership just by listening, which all state officers should be good at, at that point?

For most of the participants, acquisition of agricultural knowledge and technical exposure was most often referred to when asked to describe the leadership learning that occurred during ILSSO, rather than literature-based leadership competencies. While leadership competencies were alluded to throughout responses, participants did not make the clear connection that what was being described was leadership development.

Theme #3: Changed Perspectives on Agricultural Production Methods

Most frequently referenced in post-trip questionnaires, many participants expressed a shift in perspective around organic and alternative production methods. Many participants shared

their knowledge of agriculture was limited to conventional production methods and shared that the ILSSO experience allowed them to develop open-mindedness toward organic farming and other sustainable practices as a result of interacting with the producers. Harriet wrote, “In my agricultural background, we are always told that conventional farming is the only way to go. Seeing the feasibility of these practices opens up a whole new world.” Similarly, one participant wrote:

We saw a lot of different agricultural operations on the trip and each were unique. While phrases like “organic” and “all natural” may have made me roll my eyes before, I now realize that these are not bad things, and they have a place in our market.

Participants valued being able to hear the personal and passionate anecdotes from producers and better understand the “why” behind the choices of their operation practices. Stacey explained their newfound appreciation in this way: “Organic agriculture isn’t bad it’s just different, and there is a place for that. ... The experience [sic] just gave me a way better perspective and understanding of [sic] why we have stuff like organic farming.” Other participants expressed excitement to share their newfound knowledge with others and hopefully influence others to change their perspectives on organic, sustainable, and regenerative production methods within their state and local communities. Philip shared:

So when I came back [from ILSSO] a lot of those one sided farmers asked me questions, and so I was able to implement [sic] that open mindset [sic] and advocate for [organic and regenerative practices] and change some of their perspectives and help them understand why people choose that.

Many participants described ILSSO as an eye-opening experience forcing them out of their comfort zones. In post-trip reflective statements, most participants communicated changed perspectives and open-mindedness, and when expanded upon in focus groups, these sentiments related back to a new appreciation and understanding of non-traditional agricultural production methods. Sterling shared in focus groups, “I honestly left the trip with a whole new perspective on organic farming.” Another participant wrote, “I learned that there is a place for farming practices I don’t have at home (conventional, biodynamic, etc.) I learned that it is okay if opinions shift [sic] and being curious is extremely important.” Communicating these changed perspectives to peers and community members in participants’ home states as well as a desire to advocate for non-traditional production methods emerged as key takeaways for most participants.

Theme #4: Varied Perspectives of Cultural Experiences

When the trip location was moved to California, participants still expected to experience a new culture in a new area of the United States. In both the pre- and post-trip questionnaires, participants admitted they previously had a negative perception of the state of California as a whole. After attending ILSSO, participants expressed developing respect for the state of California. They liked being able to share their experiences and refute any negative stereotypes of California they feel FFA members and producers may have back in their home states. Lisa wrote, “I was able to break that thought that California is crazy and all hippies, and I can’t wait

to share what I learned to everyone back home.” Another participant echoed that sentiment by writing, “I came in with preconceived notions about California after hearing from others how ‘bad’ it was.”

However, some participants expressed a desire to be immersed in California culture and felt the trip did not provide those experiences. Maren said, “Learning about a different culture was something I was kind of expecting to learn a little bit more about and ... [I wanted] to understand some more of the differences between California and [my state].” Jessie shared similar thoughts: “One thing I was looking forward to in Costa Rica is [sic] seeing the diversity in their culture and music, so I think finding different ways to experience the different cultures in California [would have been beneficial].”

One participant believed other students would not gain any cultural competencies from going to California because it was no different than any other place in the United States. Peter shared, “If [National FFA] were to continue the domestic experience, they have to change it from being a cultural experience because it won’t be anything new to [state FFA officers].”

Several participants also perceived a domestic experience to be more beneficial than an international trip because they felt it was easier to apply the new information regarding agricultural production methods because of the similar context. Aspen said:

California has access to the same machinery, same technology, [sic] same regulations [sic]. ... We probably would not have been able to apply as much knowledge as we were able to take from California, as we would have been able to take from Costa Rica.

Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

We explored the perceived leadership competencies developed by participants of ILSSO, a short-term domestic tour. The four emergent themes revealed participants’ takeaways from the experience. Students valued the social capital developed through participation in the experience and can build upon the relationships post-trip as resources for future goals and endeavors. Participants appreciated the networking opportunities on ILSSO and how these connections were perceived to be beneficial as they continue into college and the professional world. Students did not necessarily view ILSSO as a leadership development experience and often conflated the attainment of knowledge with leadership competency development. A disconnect between an intended outcome of the program, leadership competency development, and student perceptions was apparent. However, students did suggest ILSSO expanded their perceptions about the diversity of agricultural production methods in the industry, and it allowed them to build social capital via relationships formed with fellow participants (Coleman, 1988). Participants expressed an expansion of personal worldview related to agriculture and gained a technical understanding of the varying facets of the industry as a result of ILSSO (Bunch et al., 2018; Gomez-Lanier, 2017; Smith et al., 2013; Sobania & Braskamp, 2009; Roberts et al., 2019). Exposing participants to non-traditional agricultural

production methods allowed them to explore other facets of the AFNR industry through the tours and engagement with industry leaders to explore potential career opportunities. Such experiences are critical in conveying awareness and shifting perspectives of the vast industry opportunities while participating in peer-to-peer engagement (Homeyer, 2017; NASEM, 2021).

Finally, participants' opinions of the domestic location for the trip and lack of cultural learning perhaps reveals U.S. culture was centered during the experience and not brought to light to generate more critical thought about cultural differences within the continent. Regarding cross-cultural awareness, participants seemed to acknowledge and empathize with the diversity of agricultural practices and ideas they encountered; however, the failure to recognize cultural differences by centering United States culture during the experience kept them from considering external perceptions of their own norms (Hanvey, 1982). It appears there was a missed opportunity to expose participants to the vast micro-cultures within the United States and more specifically within the state of California.

We recommend those hoping to lead similar short-term study abroad tours, whether domestic or abroad, design curriculum with a global leadership competency framework to better guide the learning experience as it relates to leadership development and cross-cultural awareness. Simply participating in international or domestic leadership experiences with some guided independent reflection and facilitated conversation may not be enough to ensure the development of cultural competence and global leadership competencies (Bunch et al., 2018).

While this study explored perceived outcomes of a domestic experience, it is hard to know whether the findings would be different from an abroad ILSSO experience. It is encouraged that this study be replicated the next time ILSSO can travel outside the U.S. continent to compare findings in different contexts. If findings are similar, regardless of locale, creating domestic study tour experiences for students may be a viable way to create more accessible unique learning opportunities producing positive outcomes. Among agricultural students, there may also be an opportunity to utilize domestic study tour experiences reflective of cultural differences within the United States and diverse agricultural practices to create knowledge growth in students and allow participants to develop awareness surrounding industry opportunities and build relationships with fellow agriculturalists (NASEM, 2021). Future studies should be conducted to assess the leadership development outcomes of similar youth leadership development programs.

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