

**Self-Perceived Youth Leadership Life Skills Development Outcome of Virginia Governor's School of Agriculture: A Case Study**

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses the leadership development outcome of the Virginia Governor's School of Agriculture (VGSA), a pre-college residential program, whose mission is to develop future leaders and scientists for careers in agriculture. No leadership classes were taught, and participants can only be expected to learn leadership skills experientially. The Youth Leadership Life Skills Development Scale (YLLSDS) survey was completed by 91 participants of the VGSA. Findings suggest a "slight" to "fairly moderate" YLLSD among VGSA participants. Since there was not "a lot of gain" perceived in any of the YLLSD sub-domains, we assume this might be because the VGSA program does not teach leadership as a course. Therefore, we recommend the VGSA develop a leadership curriculum for future cohorts.

**Introduction**

Today's youth can be said to be privileged, considering the plethora of youth development interventions we have today (Seemiller, 2018). Formal and informal, in-school and out-of-school youth organizations are on the rise. However, in order to improve the quality of these programs, we need to know the programs that work and those that do not, the aspects of programs that work and those that do not (Anderson, Sabatelli, & Trachtenberg, 2007). This paper discusses the leadership life skills development outcome of the Virginia Governor's School of Agriculture (VGSA), a pre-college summer agricultural program, whose mission is to "develop future leaders and scientists for careers in Agriculture" (Friedel, 2017, p. 5). This is a 4-week residential program that focusses on acquainting high school students with careers in agriculture. While courses were being taught on five major career areas, however, there were no specific leadership classes taught, and participants can only be expected to learn leadership skills by participating in group projects and socializing activities, thereby making it experiential in nature (Gould & Voelker, 2012; Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler, & Henderson, 2007; Turkay & Tirthali, 2010). Therefore, we refer to youth leadership life skills development as a secondary outcome of the VGSA. We are not aware of any research that has studied the youth leadership life skills development outcome of the VGSA. However, there is need for VGSA program planners to know if the VGSA is effective in developing future leaders and which leadership skills are developed (or not). The purpose of this study was to describe VGSA participants' self-perceived gain of leadership life skills as a result of participation in VGSA program. Specific objectives include:

- 1) Describe VGSA participants' demographics;
- 2) Describe VGSA participants' self-perceived Youth Leadership Life Skills Development (YLLSD) scores;
- 3) Describe the relationship between selected descriptive characteristics and YLLSD scores.

## **Background**

Although there are many conceptual frameworks for studying leadership development in youth, there is a lack of concrete theory in literatures (Murphy & Reichard, 2011; Seemiller, 2018). According to Miller (1975) leadership life skills refer to competencies that are necessary for performing leadership roles. Miller identified and prioritized 68 leadership life skills that are necessary for youth leadership development among 4-H members. Out of the 68 leadership skills identified by Miller, only 34 leadership skills made the priority list (Miller, 1975). These skills were then categorized under six sub-domains: decision making, relationships, learning, management, understanding self, and group processes. Miller (1976) then re-conceptualized leadership life skills and added a seventh sub-domain: communication. Miller's (1976) conceptualization has been adapted by other researchers measuring youth leadership life skills development (see Ahrens, Cox, Burris, & Dykes, 2015; Real & Harlin, 2006; SeEVERS, Dormody, & Clason, 1995; Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997). In this study, we measured youth leadership life skills development with 30 leadership skills, categorized under seven sub-domains from Miller (1976): decision making, relationships, learning, management, understanding self, group processes, and communication. Many of the competency areas of youth leadership skills development frameworks in extant literature match some of the sub-domains from Miller (see Redmond & Dolan, 2016; Ricketts & Rudd, 2002; Seemiller, 2013). According to Miller (1976), the higher the life skills gained by youth, the higher their capability in performing leadership roles.

## **Description of program/Methodology**

### **Description of program**

The VGSA is a 4-week residential program that takes place every summer on the college campus of Virginia Tech. VGSA participants include junior and senior students from various private, public, and home schools across Virginia. In order to have a broad knowledge of agriculture, students are required to attend classes in all core areas (i.e. agricultural & biological systems engineering, agricultural economics, animal science, food science, and plant science). In the last week, students are then required to focus on one of the five core areas to gain a deeper understanding. Since this is a residential program, it is similar to what is experienced in youth camps (Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler, & Henderson, 2007). Besides living on their own, away from parents and closer to peers, students engage in socializing activities like participating in field trips, and outdoor games. As part of the program, students are assigned to a group of five to complete a final project that focusses on one of the identified topics of interest. Survey questionnaires were administered to 91 participants of the 2017 cohort on the final day of the program, and all 91 participants completed the questionnaires. SPSS version 25 was used for data analysis. We received approval from Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board before starting this research. In addition, we received permission from the parents of the GSA participants, since most of the participants are younger than 18 years old.

## Research Design

We used a descriptive survey methodology and a correlational design for this study (Ahrens, Cox, Burris, & Dykes, 2015; Real & Harlin, 2006; Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997). We adopted the Youth Leadership Life Skills Development Scale (YLLSDS) developed by Seevers, Dormody, and Clason (1995) to measure Youth Leadership Life Skills Development (YLLSD) score. This is a 30-indicator, unidimensional instrument that uses a four-point sub-scale ranging from 0 = no gain to 3 = a lot of gain. This instrument measures youth leadership skills under seven sub-domains, consistent with Miller's (1976) seven sub-domains: communication skills (e.g. I am a good listener), decision making skills (e.g. I consider all choices before making a decision), skills in getting along with others (e.g. consider the needs of others), learning skills (e.g. I can use information to solve problems), management skills (e.g. I can delegate responsibility), skills in understanding yourself (e.g. I am sure of my abilities), skills in working with groups (e.g. I trust other people). The Cronbach's alpha for YLLSDS in this study was 0.969. The descriptive variables correlated with summated YLLSDS score include: age, gender, and grade point average (GPA).

## Current Results

### 1) Describe VGSA participants' demographics

VGSA participant demographics were described in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity. By gender, VGSA participants (N = 91) consisted of 70.3 percent females and 29.7 percent males. By age, 8.8 percent were 15 years old, 38.5 percent were 16 years old; 51.6 percent were 17 years old; and 1.1 percent were 18 years old. By ethnicity, the largest portion (45.1%) identified as "Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander", followed by "Asian" (38.5%); the rest included – "Black or African American" (7.7%), "Hispanic or Latino" (3.3%), and "White/Caucasian" (3.3%%).

### 2) Describe VGSA participants' self-perceived Youth Leadership Life Skills Development (YLLSD) scores.

All YLLSDS sub-domains have means of 1.41 or greater, which means VGSA participants perceived they gained leadership skills as a result of the program (Table 1). The top 3 skills gained included: learning skills, skills in working with groups, and decision-making skills; while the bottom three skills gained included: management skills, skills in getting along with others, and skills in understanding self.

Table 1

*YLLSDS sub-domain means, standard deviation, and coefficients of reliability of VGSA Participants (N = 91)*

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YLLSDS domains	<i>Mean</i> <sup>a</sup>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Reliability coefficients</i> <sup>b</sup>
Learning Skills	1.72	0.80	0.858
Skills in working with groups	1.70	0.84	0.868
Decision-making skills	1.67	0.70	0.847
Communication skills	1.64	0.85	0.686
Skills in understanding self	1.58	0.81	0.909
Skills in getting along with others	1.51	0.83	0.928
Management skills	1.41	0.85	0.768

<sup>a</sup>Scale values are 0 to 3. Scale was 0 = No gain, 1 = Slight gain, 2 = Moderate gain, 3 = A Lot of gain. <sup>b</sup>Cronbach's Alpha.

3) Describe the relationship between selected descriptive characteristics and YLLSD scores.

Results of Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient showed a nonsignificant correlation (-0.106) between summated YLLSDS scores and age; a nonsignificant correlation (-0.18) between summated YLLSDS scores and gender; and a non-significant correlation (0.077) between summated YLLSDS scores and GPA. All three calculations were nonsignificant based on an alpha level of 0.05.

### Conclusions/Recommendations

Findings suggest that there was a “slight” to “fairly moderate” gain in leadership skills among VGSA participants. This supports prior research indicating leadership skills can be developed through experiential learning (Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler, & Henderson, 2007; Turkay & Tirthali, 2010). However, since there was not “a lot of gain” perceived in any of the YLLSDS, we assume the potential was limited by the fact that the VGSA program does not teach leadership as a course. Therefore, we recommend the VGSA develop a leadership curriculum for future cohorts. This is in consonance with the recommendation by Seemiller (2018) that leadership development programs must be intentional in teaching leadership skills. Moreover, the fact there was no significant relationship found between YLLSDS and all of the descriptive variables tested seems to suggest that VGSA participants can become leaders regardless of age, gender, and academic achievement. Since this is an evaluation of the VGSA, readers should be careful in generalizing its results. However, these results might be valuable to those interested in planning youth leadership development programs.

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