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Leadership and Ethics: A Relationship Important to Agricultural Education

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In 1949, Hamlin asserted, "One of our greatest failures in Agricultural Education has been the failure to teach any part of agriculture in conjunction with all of its important relationships" (p. 329). Furthering this idea of relationships, Hamlin (1949) identified the primary leadership responsibility of agricultural education to be the recognition and maturation of the relationship between agriculture and the community. Hamlin believed that the failure to recognize this particular relationship could have detrimental effects. Less than 50 years later, the ramifications of agriculture's failure to recognize these relationships has grown in direct proportion with the size of communities and the scope of agriculture.

Although time may have altered what Hamlin referred to as the community as well as agriculture, the examples to follow would indicate that agricultural education continues to be blind to some of its "important relationships." For instance, the failure to envision the relationships of monetary profit with environmental loss, of incorporation with exploitation, of increased irrigation with decreased water tables, of erosion and soil degradation with unrotated, high-yielding crops, together create a mosaic of unrecognized relationships. Blatz (1991) claims soil erosion to be mounting at onerous rates, in fact, exceeding those of the depression Dust Bowl days. In the Great Plains, due to increased irrigation, the soil is washing away faster than it can be replenished and at levels above those set as *intolerable* by the Soil Conservation Service (Jackson, 1980). Researchers estimate that the vast Ogallala aquifer will be unable to serve its constituents past the year 2033 (Bender, Lovins, & Lovins, 1984). Additionally, expansive, ever-increasing urban growth continues to increase the spectrum of necessary pesticides, fertilizers, irrigation systems, and hybrid seeds, making the problem somewhat recursive.

The vast scope of the aforementioned problems, indicates not a singular failure, as perceived by Hamlin, but a complex illness plaguing agriculture. These problems call for agricultural leaders capable of solving complex scenarios. According to Hitt (1988), complex scenarios cannot be solved by just any leader. That is, leaders must acknowledge their ethical responsibilities in order to decipher complicated issues--leadership and ethics must go hand-in-hand.

Before attempting to form alliances between leadership and ethics, a definition of ethics must be established. For the purpose of this research, a liberal, albeit simplistic, definition is used. Ethics refers to the study of right and wrong, of duty and obligation in human conduct and of reasoning and choice about them (Hastings Center Report, 1980). When yoking this definition to leadership, ethics must be referred to in an applied sense. May (1987) submits that the role of applied ethics is one of "corrective vision," in which distinctions are made between the descriptive and the prescriptive. In the process of applying ethical standards to everyday moral conflicts, the student becomes capable of seeing what could be versus what the current circumstances present. Perhaps the failure to formally assimilate ethics and leadership may be one source of the problems previously discussed.

For most, higher education serves as one of the last opportunities for formal leadership education, as well as the possibility of assimilating its direct relationship to ethical responsibility. The abundance of student organizations and leadership opportunities (i.e., formal and informal) in Colleges of Agriculture (COA) would indicate that a significant number of future agricultural leaders are being molded in the COA milieu. This study provides a research-based ethical profile of the student leaders within the COA in a large land-

grant institution. This analysis should be helpful in establishing the nature and need for future ethical leadership instruction, and should serve as a perspective on the purposes of student leadership experiences and organizations within COA.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine the ethics of selected student leaders within a College of Agriculture. The following objectives were identified to accomplish this stated purpose:

To determine the perception of success held by leaders of student organizations within COA.

To determine the students' ability to make ethical decisions.

To determine if relationships exist between the ethical characteristics possessed by the students and their perceived success as leaders.

Procedures

Twenty-four College of Agriculture student leaders served as the population and sample for this study. These student leaders served as representatives of their respective organizations within the COA at a large land-grant institution in the Southwest. Together these students form an Agricultural Council, which serves to oversee the events within the COA. The 24 students participated in the study during a regularly scheduled meeting of the Agricultural Council.

For the purpose of this study, a series of thematic vignettes were used to determine the previously mentioned objectives (Murphy, 1993). The thematic vignettes allowed for the determination of ethical actions on the part of the respondent. The vignettes, which dealt with problems relevant to college students, were used for this type of research to educe more reliable data from respondents than simple questions might elicit (Alexander & Becker, 1978; Cunningham, 1992; Fraedrich, 1988).

The themes of the vignettes corresponded with those characteristics identified by Murphy (1993) as personifying ethical leaders. Those characteristics used in this study are considered most representative of ethical leaders (i.e., honesty, integrity, communication, and moral character). Ideally student leaders, in responding to the vignettes, would need to possess the particular ethical characteristics, associated with that vignette, in order to act ethically. To examine validity of the themes and their corresponding ethical characteristics, the four vignettes were distributed to a pilot group (n=12). The respondents were asked to match the characteristic (i.e., integrity, communication, honesty, or moral character) with its corresponding vignette (i.e., Vignette 1, 2, 3, or 4).

In order to gauge students' ethical leadership, each of the vignettes was accompanied by three questions. The questionnaire contained two summary questions that were used to ascertain the respondents' perceptions of their leadership success and their ethical decision-making ability. The first question dealt with the importance/unimportance of the issue covered by the scenario. The second question, fashioned with specific reference to the individual scenarios, focused on the action that the student leader would take in comparison to the actions taken by the "main character" in the case, facilitated the determination of the students' ethical decision-making ability. The third question considered the ease associated with the dilemma presented in each vignette.

Rather than have the students respond on a yes or no basis to the three questions, they were required to place a mark on a continuum as an indicator of their position. To permit a more precise measurement, all of the questions were designed using a ten centimeter fixed linear scale that was divided into 100 equivalent units. Each metric continuum was complemented by bipolar adjectives (i.e., important-unimportant, would-would not, or easy-difficult). Markings on the student leader questionnaire were then measured by a linear scale, and a numeric rating was determined for each question. The possible continuum scores ranged from 0 to 100, where 0 indicated the highest possible degree of respective differential (i.e., importance, ethicalness, or ease) and 100 represented the least (i.e., unimportant, unethical, or difficult). The KR-20 reliability of the instrument was determined to be .83.

Analysis of Data

Data generated from the questionnaires were transferred to electronic format for computer analysis to allow the use of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, 1986). Statistical tools employed for data analysis included frequencies and correlation analysis, as well as other descriptive statistics (e.g., means, frequencies, and standard deviations).

Findings and Discussion

The study addressed the student leaders' perception of their success and of their decision-making ability. It also assessed whether relationships existed between the ethical characteristics possessed by the students and their perceived leadership success. On self-perceived success, the scores ranged from 0 to 37 illustrating that no students perceived themselves to be unsuccessful leaders. A fixed continuum, in conjunction with the vignettes, was used to determine the students' ability to make ethical decisions. The values, on the fixed metric continuum, of the ethical/unethical decisions ranged from 0 to 100 on the 0 (most ethical) to 100 (least ethical) scale for each of the four vignettes. The group mean was 19.22 (SD=10.27). This mean indicated that the students perceived themselves to be extremely ethical leaders.

Vignette 3, which dealt with integrity (Mean = 58.74, SD=31.86), and Vignette 4, which addressed moral integrity (Mean = 59.52, SD=30.04), had the highest means and standard deviations. As reflected in these means, a majority of the student leaders would make unethical decisions under similar circumstances. Slightly more ethical were the respondents to Vignette 1 (Mean = 39.13, SD=26.69), the honesty scenario. This mean also alludes to unethical decisions, given similar circumstances, by a large percentage (39%) of the student leaders. In a different light, the group mean for Vignette 2 (Mean = 25.13, SD=28.12), the communication dilemma, indicated a shift toward ethical decision-making. The large standard deviation would indicate tremendous variance in individual responses.

Ironically, the student leaders' self-perceived ethical decision-making was lower (i.e., highly ethical) than any other mean (Mean = 19.22, SD=10.27). This indicates that over 100 percent of the students perceived themselves as ethical leaders, however, their actions (as shown by their responses to the vignettes) would indicate a different status. The frequencies for self-perceived ethical decision-making ability ranged from 0 to 50, an indication that unethical decisions were very rarely make.

A sematic differential was also employed to analyze ethical decision-making ability. Although the sematic differential did not prove to be an internally consistent scale, the variation from vignette to vignette was worth noting how the student leaders evaluated the vignettes. Figure 1 shows the mean responses for each pair of words reported by the student leaders.

Figure 1 indicates that the patterns of Vignettes 3 and 4 are remarkably similar, and perhaps this pattern indicates a conceptual parallel. That is, the student leaders went through the same mental processing for both decisions. A replication in pattern did not exist for the vignette in which the students responded the most ethically--Vignette 2. In Vignettes 1 and 2, the results indicated the increasing importance of the issue had a positive relationship to the students' ethical decision-making ability.

Lastly, this experiment explored possible relationships existing between the ethical characteristics possessed by the students, as identified by Murphy (1993), and their perceived leadership success. Table 1 displays the vignettes with their corresponding characteristics, value frequencies, and percentages. The value frequencies and percentages indicate the number and percentage of individuals, from the pilot group, who matched the respective characteristic with the vignette. For instance, 10 (59%) of the respondents observed honesty to be the prominent theme expressed in Vignette 1. The ethical decision-making ability means are also included for comparison purposes.

The findings from the pilot test indicated that the dilemmas did test for their respective characteristics. The results also indicated a direct relationship between the increase in pilot group consensus (about the characteristics) and the students' ethical decision-making ability. That is, the characteristics that were more easily identified by the pilot group (i.e., communication and

Vignette 1

To me, this type of issue is . . .

important — unimportant

Given the same circumstances, would you pay the cable bill?

definitely would — definitely would not

For me, this decision was . . .

easy — difficult

Vignette 2

To me, this type of issue is . . .

important — unimportant

Given the same circumstances, would you have explained the process?

definitely would — definitely would not

For me, this decision was . . .

easy — difficult

Vignette 3

To me, this type of issue is . . .

important — unimportant

Given the same circumstances, would you tell Sam about your friendship with Kim?

definitely would — definitely would not

For me, this decision was . . .

easy — difficult

Vignette 4

To me, this type of issue is . . .

important — unimportant

Given the same circumstances, would you tell Janet about the conservative nature of the company?

definitely would — definitely would not

For me, this decision was . . .

easy — difficult

Figure 1. Ethical decision-making semantic differential

Table 1. Ethical Decision-Making Ability and Characteristics Means and Frequencies

Student Leaders			Pilot Group		
Vignette	Mean	Characteristic	N	f	%
1	39.13	Honesty	13	10	59
2	25.13	Communication	18	12	67
3	58.74	Integrity	21	8	38
4	59.26	Moral Character	16	6	38

honesty) were the same characteristics that the student leaders possessed more strongly.

Table 2 displays the correlations of self-perceived leadership success and ethical decision-making ability. Shown is the correlation between the students' self-perceived ethical decision-making ability and self perceived success. The results indicated a statistically significant correlation between self-perceived ethics and success ($r=.57$, $p<.01$). The students who perceived themselves to be successful also perceived their decisions to be ethical. However, the lack of correlation between the perceived leader success and the ethical characteristics indicated that the possession of these characteristics by the leaders was not related to their perceived success. In conjunction, Tables 1 and 2 indicate that student leaders believed that their decisions were ethical, when in fact, they were not.

Table 2. Correlation Coefficients of Success and Ethical Decision-Making Ability

		Success
	Characteristics	r
Vignette 1	Honesty	.14
Vignette 2	Communication	-.03
Vignette 3	Integrity	.05
Vignette 4	Moral Character	.23
SP Ethics		.57**

** ($p<.01$)

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this study revealed some intriguing information about the ethical decision-making ability of student leaders within a COA. Before concluding, caveats regarding the study should be noted. First, the study was exploratory in nature, and examined domains of ethics and leadership that have remained, for the most part, untouched by empirical research. Any generalizations of the results must be approached with caution. Second, although the questionnaire proved valid in testing for the aforementioned characteristics, it is certainly plausible that the instrument was unsuccessful in tapping the true ethical character of the surveyed students.

Even given these cautions, the implications resulting from this study are worth noting for both researchers and practitioners alike. The findings imply that many students holding leadership positions do not possess the most definitive characteristics of ethical leaders. Although some would argue that these characteristics can be attained through informal or vicarious experiences, the results suggest that the respondents have not yet been in a position or experience from which to gain these characteristics. Hence, a need for formal ethical leadership instruction for student leaders in COA is indicated.

Even more disturbing was the indication that those students surveyed perceived their decisions as ethical. In addition, the fact that the student leaders perceived themselves as being successfuly signals a need for reevaluation of what it means to be successful. For many of these students, honesty, integrity, and moral character did not appear to be part of their success. These previously held beliefs could possibly decrease the students openness to contradicting perspectives, thus making formal instruction even more difficult.

The exploratory nature of this research has uncovered a significant number of questions for future research. Some of these would include the following: What externalities and demographics (e.g., religion, sex, ethnicity, experiences) differed between those students responding ethically and those responding unethically? Do students go through the similar mental processes when acting ethical or unethical, as suggested by the semantic differential? What actions would the student leaders perceive as unethical, and why?

These questions merely scratch the surface. However, without further exploration the possible impact of these questions on the future of

leadership in agriculture is indeterminable. However, the aforementioned results would suggest a need for the recognition of the relationship between ethics and leadership within the agricultural community. The ramifications of unrecognized relationships within agriculture have the capability of becoming irreversible. These results do indeed indicate a lack of marriage and perhaps a divorce between ethics and leadership. If agricultural education hopes to abate the current negative trends in agriculture, they must begin to recognize the relationship between agricultural leadership and ethical responsibility.

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