

# A Narrative Inquiry Exploring Young Adults in Production Agriculture Story of Hard Work

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## Abstract

*Higher education educators are transitioning to more student-centered learning approaches, including when designing educational material and actively teaching. Further, young adults ages 18-26 typically make up higher education classrooms. Young adults in higher education are at a fundamental phase where they make decisions that affect their education and career. More specifically, young adults with a background in production agriculture can be at a crossroads when it comes to returning to the agricultural operation or determining different career paths. There is a sizeable research emphasis on the stress, work-life balance, and mental health of owners or operators of agricultural operations. However, there is very little research regarding how working and living on an agricultural operation impacts the children of the farmers or ranchers. This study uses a qualitative narrative inquiry approach to examine young adults who grew up in production agriculture and their relation to hard work. Story episodes served as the unit of analysis, where the story episodes occur within the small stories of each participant that then live within the meganarrative. The meganarrative describes how young adults feel pressure to return to the agricultural operation, may feel guilty for leaving, and have poor work-life balance. Yet above all, they have a deep sense of appreciation for production agriculture and their work ethic gained from working on the farm or ranch. Higher education educators can use this information when designing education material. Further, this information is helpful for the agricultural industry with topics such as succession planning.*

## Introduction

Young adults, ages 18 to 26, are typically in a transitional period of their life where they assume societal roles, are expected to become financially independent, and have other life events that impact their social roles and tasks (Bonnie et al., 2015). Within this stage of life, young adults are still developing and refining their cognitive skills and psychological competencies needed to make mature decisions and self-regulate themselves (Bonnie et al., 2015). Yet, society has placed young adults in an in-between period of adolescence and adulthood (Bonnie et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2012). During this vulnerable time, there is typically a transition from student to worker and society has tasked young people to make important decisions without being fully psychologically developed (Bonnie et al., 2015; Cauffman et al., 2010). These decisions can involve individual risk and opportunity that ultimately shape future life trajectories (Bonnie et al., 2015). Consequently, social and institutional support systems, such as higher education, can help young adults navigate this uncertain phase of life (Bonnie et al., 2015; Roisman et al., 2004).

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This period of life may also be when young people are in higher education (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). In 2020, the share of the adult population in the United States enrolled in some form of higher education included 49% of 18-19 years old, 52.8% of 20-21 years old, and 26.6% of 22-24 years old (NCES, 2023). Additionally, higher education educators are transitioning to more student-centered learning approaches and must know their students and exhibit respect for them (Tigelaar et al., 2004). Combined, the sheer number of students in higher education and the competencies of higher education educators demonstrate the importance of understanding the stories of students. This qualitative study explores the stories of young adults, ages 18-26, who grew up in production agriculture, including a farm or ranch. More specifically, it examines how they perceive and define hard work in the transitional period of their life, either in school or professional career.

### **Review of Literature**

Working in production agriculture can cause physical and mental stress (Chengane et al., 2021; Fraser et al., 2005; Kolstrup et al., 2013). The success of the operation is based on a variety of factors that farmers and ranchers have little to no control over. These factors include market prices, weather, machinery complications, disease outbreaks, subsidies, trade disputes, and more (Chengane et al., 2021; Kolstrup et al., 2013). Previous literature highlights how characteristics of working on a production agriculture operation can cause mental stress and work strain (Chengane et al., 2021; Fraser et al., 2005; Kolstrup et al., 2013; McShane et al., 2015).

Work-related stress can be defined as strain or pressure where work demands are higher than what an individual can manage or cope (Kolstrup et al., 2013). Farming and ranching have unique characteristics that can be hazardous to mental health (Fraser et al., 2005). Production agriculturalists typically work long hours on the farm or ranch which requires constant vigilance and monitoring of farm operations (Proctor & Hopkins, 2023). Due to the extreme work schedule, there is typically little to no leisure or free time, a lack of opportunities for vacation, and a lack of time with family. Farmers and ranchers can also experience high levels of sleep deprivation and exhaustion or fatigue that impact their mental strain (Chengane et al., 2021). The stress resulting from a lack of work-life balance can transfer from the farmer or rancher to their family (Steup et al., 2022).

The complexity of stressful experiences on a farm or ranch can be challenging to measure (Kolstrup et al., 2013; McShane et al., 2015). However, previous research suggests the heavy workload, time pressure, and elements out of their control including climate conditions and negative public opinions, add to the stress for farmers and ranchers (McShane et al., 2015). While there is evidence of increasing mental strain due to the psychosocial demands, expectations, and stressors, farmers and ranchers can also have a perception of meaningful work (Kolstrup et al., 2013).

While much of previous research focuses on the farmer or rancher, few research studies explore how the hard work of production agriculture impacts the youth who grow up on the operation. It is known that children and adolescents on the farm can face the same pressures and stresses their adult relatives experience on the farm (Fraser et al., 2005). Farms and ranches serve as both homes and a workplace, leading to a blurred line between work and family (Fraser et al., 2005). Production agriculture operations are also most typically succeeded by inheritance of family members, including the youth who grew up in the operation (Cassidy & McGrath, 2014; Chiswell, 2014). As youth who grew up on a production agriculture operation grows into their young adult stage, they may have to make decisions regarding their family's operation or livelihood, leading to an additional component of mental strain (Bonnie et al., 2015; Cauffman et al., 2010; Plana-Farran & Gallizo, 2021).

### **Higher Education Considerations**

In addition to the demands of production agriculture, there is a high likelihood the young adults who grew up on a production agriculture operation may be involved in higher education (NCES, 2023). When a student with an agricultural background enters a higher education classroom, there may be preconceived ideas held by higher education educators about how their experiences translates to education (Boerngen & Rickard, 2020). Further, research suggests higher education educators can view their role as teachers includes recognizing the needs of students and assisting them in meeting their needs (Shagrir, 2015). Additionally, they may find themselves in situations where they must empower the students and use student-centered learning approaches (Kember, 1997; Shagrir, 2015; Tigelaar et al., 2004). As higher education faculty continue to become further removed from production agriculture, it can be difficult to understand students' backgrounds with such experience (Boerngen & Rickard, 2020). To strengthen academic success, educators should consider how variables such as curriculum, teaching approaches, and teaching techniques can match students' needs (Baker et al., 2014). Further, including holistic models of teaching, such as experiential learning practices, can foster an educative experience for higher education students (Coleman et al., 2024). However, faculty's beliefs about education, self, and context can impact adopting education practices, such as inquiry-based learning (Baldock et al., 2022). Understanding students' needs and responding to students' concerns can create a more student-centered learning environment, ultimately resulting in more effective learning and relevance for students with an agricultural background (Chung & Chow, 2004; Wright, 2011).

### **Purpose and Objective**

As young adults are transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, there can be pressure to make decisions regarding education or career opportunities (Plano-Farran & Gallizo, 2021). However, there is very little research detailing young adults in production agriculture narratives regarding their experience in higher education and professional careers. This study aims to delve deeper and examine the stories and lived experiences of young adults who grew up in production agriculture and their perceived relation to hard work in production agriculture and beyond. The objectives of this study include:

1. Provide detailed narratives of young adults who grew up in production agriculture, describing how they perceive hard work inside and outside the agricultural production operation.
2. Propose recommendations to higher education educators understanding on how to understand the lived experiences of some of their students and adapt their teaching to match student needs.
3. Provide implications for policy and theory about the agricultural industry and higher education.

### **Methodology**

This study uses a narrative inquiry approach to examine the stories of young adults who grew up in production agriculture and their perception of hard work. Narrative inquiry is both a phenomenon and a method that includes an in-depth exploration of the lived experience of a small sample of participants (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Rooted in aspects of John Dewey's methodological lenses and pragmatic philosophy, narrative inquiry recognizes that humans live storied lives (Clandinin, 2006). Yet, an individual's story is shaped by social, cultural, and institutional narratives (Clandinin, 2006). Narrative inquiry is rooted in experience and can synthesize individuals' personal, historical, and geographical relation to a phenomenon by describing one's experience (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Peake & Davidson, 2023). Narrative inquiry is typically used within education by grounding practices into experiences (Kitchen et al., 2011). While this study does not include educators themselves, it tells the stories of current and past students. This study has implications within higher education practices, and policy and theory implications within production agriculture.

## **Sample**

The population included young adults, ages 18-26, who grew up on an agricultural operation, referred to as a farm or ranch. The inclusion criteria included: (1) the operation had to be the primary source of income for the family and (2) they had to live on the operation for most of their lifetime. However, agricultural operation ownership was not a requirement to be included in this study. A network sampling framework was implemented to identify and recruit participants. In network sampling, recruited participants support the researchers by identifying peers who match the inclusion criteria (Granovetter, 1976). Overall, five participants from across the United States were identified and interviewed. Three of the five participants also included of prolonged engagement and observations. Within this sample, the participants lived on the operation until they left for higher education at age 17-18.

## **Data Collection & Analysis**

Participants took part in a semi-structured interview to allow them to freely respond, elaborate, and explore their narratives while I could maintain some control of the direction of the interview (Given, 2008). By having a conversational tone, I was able to build rapport with the participants while they were encouraged to be more active and contribute to a conversation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). An interview guide included open-ended questions to understand the participants' complete story rather than simply a reflection (Given, 2008). Other questions were included during the conversation to further the discussion surrounding the research purpose (Given, 2008). The semi-structured interview questions included demographic questions and questions for the participants to describe their narrative surrounding hard work, including their day-to-day life, challenges, benefits, definition of hard work, work-life balance, and the influence of hard work on their life. Within this qualitative study, the researcher was the instrument with the interview questions consistently cross referenced to the research objectives and further validated by an outside narrative inquiry expert (Given, 2008).

Data analysis began with writing field notes, developing transcriptions of interviews, and data and concept driven coding procedures were used (Glaser & Strass, 1967). Data were analyzed using story episodes as a unit of analysis (Acosta et al., 2019). After an initial analysis of the transcript and incidents, story episodes were used to classify recurring episodes within the conversation that may not have had a complete beginning, middle, and end (Acosta et al., 2019). A story episode could include a characterization of actors in a setting, the setting of the plot, or an ending of a story, with the main characteristic of a story episode including that it is not a complete story but instead an element of the story (Acosta et al., 2019). These story episodes can be described using of small stories that live within the mega narratives (Olson & Craig, 2009). The meganarrative derived from the small stories can create direction for policy, practice, and theory (Olson & Craig, 2009).

## **Trustworthiness Measures**

Throughout the study, trustworthiness measures followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) recommendations to ensure confidence by addressing credibility, authenticity, dependability, confirmability, and transferability throughout the data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings. A reflexive journal was used throughout the process to establish credibility and authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To continue credibility and authenticity, audio recording and transcription occurred and observations of participants with prolonged engagement supported the findings (Dado et al., 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Once transcriptions were finished, member checking ensured credibility and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout coding and data analysis, peer reviewing and debriefing assisted with narrowing story episodes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The thick and rich description of findings and reflexivity demonstrate the work's transferability, credibility, and authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Reflexivity Statement

Within qualitative research, the human is the instrument (Given, 2008). Therefore, recognizing positionality, becoming aware of it, and realizing its impact on research is an essential concept of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Given, 2008; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). My research philosophy is rooted in pragmatism, where I recognize there are different ways of knowing, and I hope to understand the multiple realities of my participants (Shannon-Baker, 2016). I am a graduate student who fits in the same age bracket of young adults and grew up in an agricultural operation. My past experiences motivated me to examine this phenomenon. As an individual who experienced very similar stories to my participants, I was able to relate to their stories and used my own experiences to create rapport with participants. Throughout my experience in higher education, particularly after moving away from my family's operation, I found myself wondering if other students had similar stories of leaving family operations for education or career and how it affected their decisions. As a future educator, I was curious as to how educational practices could be tailored to match the needs of students who have agricultural obligations outside of the classroom. This narrative inquiry aims to share the unique stories of young adults in production agriculture and bring awareness to the work of "ag kids" in higher education classrooms.

## Results

The structure of describing the stories of young adults in production agriculture is by first explaining each participant's story. Within their individual narratives, it describes their small stories within the identified story episodes and then describes the meganarrative within each of the stories to inform theory, practice, and policy (Acosta et al., 2019; Olson & Craig, 2009). Pseudonyms are used, and the locations of the operations within the United States are broadly described to maintain confidentiality.

### Lauren

Lauren had seven total story episodes evident throughout her story. Her story episodes include, *outside work, working on the farm, involvement, having a calling, work-life, parents support, and dreaming of the future*. Lauren is a 25-year-old female who grew up in the Midwest part of the United States on her family's dairy farm. Lauren's story began with involvement on the farm at a young age, mainly taking care of the calves. She grew up to be involved in a variety of activities including sports, youth agricultural organizations such as 4-H, FFA, and a cattle association. She went to an in-state university where she majored in archeology and anthropology. After graduating from college, she decided to go back to the farm. She married her high school sweetheart, who also grew up on a family dairy farm, and they now work full-time on their respective family farms, with dreams to combine their farms in the future.

Before returning to the farm, she worked at two jobs including at a state park and at an agricultural agency. During these outside jobs, her hard work and desire to succeed, which stemmed from her background in production agriculture, continued. She frequently showed up early, stayed late, and did more of what was expected of her. She explained,

I felt like I was held to these high standards, or they're just normal standards on a farm, but when I portray it into normal life, I feel like I couldn't, I guess I couldn't leave. And that's what I would do, that quality of work on the farm, I wanted to portray that in whatever I did in life.

This continued with outside involvement as well. While she participated in other activities, her parents supported her to try new things. She described, "We'd go on family vacations; they always pushed us towards doing extracurricular stuff and always exploring stuff, so they always left it open." She appreciated her parents' support in trying new activities and working outside of the farm.

Through her story episodes, including work-life, working on the farm, and having a calling, she continued to describe how mentally and physically demanding it is to work full-time on the farm. Yet, she found her way back to the farm as she described the calling to go back, she stated,

I wonder if that's a thing you always feel growing up, is that sometimes you'd feel guilty if you don't go back and help the farm because you know there's no one else to go back and help and know how to do it.

The story episode *having a calling* is further explained by the continued small story describing the tornado that destroyed much of the family farm in 2019. This story episode was frequently mentioned as the reason she came back to the farm, she explained,

Throughout college, I would come back to the farm whenever I could, but I guess the calling was more of a tragedy in 2019 when the tornados hit. I was in my field school in [another state], and I was digging on a pilgrimage site when I got the phone call that all of our buildings were down, our cows were everywhere, our calves were everywhere, and that was the most helpless I ever felt.

She continued to say, "It was a longing, that I... I need to go back to help." The story continued to reveal the pressure and guilt associated with the tragedy including,

The longing was kind of a little bit of pressure, especially since I wasn't there when it [the tornado] happened. So, I felt like I needed to prove myself and I also did want to help.

Lauren accredited her hard work ethic to growing up on a farm and her parents. She recognizes farming is not just a job, but a lifestyle. Even when she tries to resemble work-life balance, she simply cannot step away from the farm.

All I do is focus on work, so even when I am trying to do quote 'balance' and I try to take a break and do something else, my mind is just always – what can I do to make the farm better? What can I do to do work better? So, my mind and my body are always 'work.'

Yet, Lauren also explained how growing up on the farm and gaining a hard work ethic from the farm gave her the confidence to give it her all, no matter the task. She stated, "It [growing up on a farm] gave me the confidence, and the thing that I knew was I could attack each situation and that I would at least try." She also added how it taught her that it's okay to ask for help and that delegating work is one of the best ways to achieve a goal in work. Lauren and her husband dream of the future where they plan to combine their family farms with robotic milking and bring awareness about the agricultural industry to the public.

The seven story episodes including, *outside work, working on the farm, involvement, having a calling, work-life, parents support, and dreaming of the future* frequently present themselves throughout Lauren's story. Lauren culminated her story by finishing with, "I mean it just feels kind of like life to me. You know it's not really a job; it's just the lifestyle of farming." Lauren's story episodes described her life of work on the farm, and she hopes to bring awareness because "a lot of the time, it feels like no one sees it [the hard work] as a young adult in agriculture because a lot of people don't understand."

### Leah

Leah had seven total story episodes evident throughout her story. Her story episodes included *working on the ranch, ranch influence, involvement, support from parents, feeling the pressure, work-life, and needed support from professors and bosses*. Leah is a 24-year-old female and is currently a master's student. Her undergraduate and masters are both in an agriculturally related field. She grew up on a family-

owned commercial beef cattle operation in the southwest part of the United States, where her mother and two uncles are three equal shareholders. Now, she works on the ranch when she can in the summer and whenever she travels back home.

Leah's story began at a young age as well; when she was not at school, sports, 4-H, FFA, or other extracurricular activities, she was working on the ranch. She was responsible for horse and cattle work on the ranch, and she explained, "My mom always joked we couldn't have food or water until our animals had food and water." This story episode of working on the ranch continued by explaining the work that takes place on a ranch; she stated, "Your immediate concern is taking care of the animals because they're your livelihood." This livelihood of growing up on the ranch influenced "every career choice that I have made," including college, what to study in college, and every decision after college. She described a deep appreciation for the ranch and its influence on their career choices, but Leah also discussed how it influenced more than just their education and career, but their connection to work. Leah stated,

Since I was never able to physically walk away from work at home, just because that's where I lived and that's what I did, I feel like I can't walk away from it now even though I can physically walk away from my work now, I can't mentally.

This connection to work began to feel like pressure. The saying "do things right and do them right the first time" frequently appeared throughout the story episodes. She explained this pressure of doing things "right" as,

It was almost just this unspoken expectation. Since my parents did those things, my sister did those things, and my cousins and everyone I grew up around with, I felt like that's just what I'm going to do, too. I put that pressure on myself.

This pressure story episode also relates to her work-life balance. While Leah sees the importance of having a balance between work and life, she does not believe she currently has one. She even recognizes that, "I'm honestly a little fearful that I'll never be able to achieve that [work-life balance]."

As Leah is currently a student, she described how she wanted to be supported by her professors and bosses, suggesting the needed support story episode. She described the importance of genuine check-ins. Leah explained, "Very rarely when someone asks how I'm doing, am I being fully honest." She added, "it all depends on how the person who is asking me asks it [how are you]." Especially in graduate school, Leah noticed there was an expectation of an answer whenever someone asked, 'how are you?' Whether this includes a sad face asking her, "are you super stressed," Leah feels an expectation to respond yes, or when someone asks cheerfully, Leah feels the need to respond cheerfully. Therefore, she desires a break in authority and no expectation when checking in on how the student is supposed to respond.

Leah's story episodes were described throughout her interview and included *working on the ranch, ranch influence, involvement, support from parents, feeling the pressure, work-life, and needed support from professors and bosses*. She finished her interview by stating, "The person that I am today, the good qualities and bad qualities, is directly tied to the way that I grew up in production agriculture." She explained that it is not only herself, but she feels everyone, including farmers, ranchers, and other people in agriculture, are taught never to complain and never to admit a weakness. Leah feels this could lead to challenges with mental health. When discussing this final thought of mental health, they finished with, "I think it's important that agriculture is not left out of the conversation."

## Tyler

Tyler had eight story episodes, *working on the ranch, ranch influence, parents support, varied support from instructors, outside of agriculture, pride, minimalist, and respect for other*. Tyler is 24 years

old from the southwest part of the United States. Tyler's story is unique to other participants as his family did not own an operation but worked as ranch hands his whole life. Throughout his childhood, his family lived and worked on seven ranches, leading him to attend five different schools when he was young. Tyler continues to work in the same industry as his parents.

The story episodes of working on the ranch, ranch influence, and parents support are described through Tyler's narrative of his childhood, college, and his career. Tyler's involvement in the cattle industry began as soon as he could get on a horse. He said, "My family has been in the ranching industry forever." Although, his family never owned any land and have only worked for other people. He described his first job as the "designated gate getter for over 18 years." His family has worked on their current ranch for ten years, making it the longest they've lived in one place. When it came time for him to go to college, he began in an agricultural program at a university in the neighboring state on scholarship and subsidies. He stated, "We didn't have money to help me get through college" and he went for two years. His parents encouraged him to go to college, he explained they said, "I don't care if you like it, don't like it, but you are going to college for one year." He made that promise to his mom but decided to go back to what he loved. He explained, "School wasn't really a fit for me, I liked ranching, I liked working hard." When the opportunity to work on a ranch came to him in 2019, he took it and did not return to college. He worked at that job for two years until he decided to try ranching on his own and bought 20 cows. However, the endeavor ended up not working out. He described his challenges by saying, "The market nowadays is very hard for young people getting into agriculture. I mean, very hard. I learned that the hard way." Tyler continued working on a different ranch, but ultimately came back to his original job, where he is responsible for about 500 cattle and 30,000 acres and his father is his foreman.

While Tyler described significant support from parents and those in the ranching community. Although he sometimes did not see eye to eye with his instructors. For example, when he decided school was not a fit for him, he described the situation by saying, "They said if I was going to fail at school then I was going to fail at life." Others were supportive, and he described them as saying, "If that's what you want to do, then do it" and "If you want to come back, I'm right here." It was the individuals that supported him that he accredits to helping him decide to take the job offer in 2019.

Another example of lack of support is within the story episode, outside of agriculture. Tyler expressed the stress he feels regarding the backlash production agriculture can sometimes receive. He described that he wishes people took more time and patience to realize the farmers are the good guys and that, "without us, people would starve." However, he recognizes the ranch must be kept safe and the consumer kept happy for the business to be successful. He said, "Outside the ranch is what keeps the ranch going."

Tyler takes pride in his work. This story episode is best explained by how Tyler described his commitment to his work. The longest Tyler has been away from the ranch is three days and he only goes to town about once every month to go grocery shopping. He explained, "When I leave this place, I get nervous, because you don't know what is going to happen." He went on to say, "it's like leaving your livelihood at the hands of God." Tyler always feels responsible for his part of the ranch. He described his work life balance is about 80 percent work with 20 percent his own time. Yet, he enjoys his work and the minimalist lifestyle it provides him. He enjoys the beauty of where he lives and being able to "sit on the porch and watch the sun go down" after a hard day of work.

Tyler accredits his work ethic to his parents and those he respects, leading to the story episode of respect for others. He explained, "The people really influenced me to choose this career, all those old cowboys." He takes joy in working hard like his parents do and continues to work alongside them. He said, "I was always taught 'work hard.' If you're not working hard, you're falling behind." It is those he respects that taught him to enjoy ranching and raised him to "try to help everybody that you can."

Tyler's story episodes describe how working on the ranch influenced him to pursue the same career as his parents. He respects those who came before him and taught him what he knows about ranching. Working hard to Tyler is trying to help everyone he can, being the first one at the job, and not being afraid to learn. He says hard work is working as hard as you can for yourself and others without rest, he described, "when you're at a job, don't sit down, lean." However, he experienced challenges of trying to own his own ranch, describes a lack of support from some instructors and public, and struggles to leave the ranch due to circumstances outside of his control.

### Emily

Emily had seven story episodes including, *working on the ranch, ranch influence, outside involvement, pride, needed support, parents support, and work-life*. Emily is 26 years old and grew up in the western part of the United States on her family's cattle ranch that also sells alfalfa hay. Emily attended an out of state university for the first two years of college, but realized she wanted to live closer to her home and major in agriculturally related field and ended up transferring to finish her education. She transferred from criminal justice to biology and moved to a school in a neighboring state. Now, she works as an agricultural educator, and she and her husband have their own ranch along with helping on her parents' ranch.

The story episode, working on the ranch and ranch influence, is described through the amount of hours Emily worked on the ranch growing up. Throughout her adolescence and adult life, she worked on the ranch almost every day. She described the amount of time by saying, "The thing about the ranch is that there is no hourly time." She continued by describing her day to day during her adolescence as, "get up and do chores before school, then I'd get home off the bus, and we would work until dark." The tasks she had working on the ranch ranged from mucking out stalls, tagging calves, harvesting hay crop, and moving pipes in the fields for irrigation purposes.

Outside of the ranch, Emily stayed involved in other activities throughout high school and college. She described how these activities intertwined with her work on the ranch by saying, "In the summer I tried to balance this ranch life, because I had to work for my dad and then played softball." She continued to play softball in college before transferring to be closer to home. She described this balance of outside involvement, work on the ranch, and school by saying, "But it was a lot, like you don't ever have a second to yourself, it's always go go go go."

However, the work she performed, she did it with pride. She described her work proudly by stating, "It's kind of a cool routine to get into, because then you don't have time to get complacent, when you are just constantly going and doing." She continued, "Your head hits the pillow, and you just want to crash." Now, as a teacher and still working in production agriculture, she enjoys her work. She said, "It is not hard for me to wake up early in the morning and get to work." While she says the mental and emotional side of teaching a lot harder, it is not hard for her to put in the time because she is used to it from working on the ranch.

Yet even though she has significant pride in her work and her experience in production agriculture, she struggled at first in the higher education classroom, explaining the needed support story episode. She said, "I didn't feel supported at all. I just put my head down, got my work done, and got out of there." She continued by saying she thought instructors did not consider the types of students they were teaching. Sometimes, she felt like instructors made her feel like "the bad guy" because of where she came from with roots in agriculture. However, she noted, "If I would have majored in agriculture, it would've been completely different."

Throughout her life, she has held a deep appreciation for her parents' support. Her parents influenced her relationship to hard work, she explained, "My dad always said, if you're not going to work hard, then it's not worth putting in the work." She continued describing her dad by saying, "My dad is the hardest worker I've ever seen in my entire life." She described both of her parents by saying, "Both of them have taught me what it's like to work hard. Both of them in complete opposite ways."

However, with all the hard work, Emily recognizes that a work-life balance does not exist on the ranch. She defined work-life balance as, "having a brain break and recover as a human being." Except she added, "But unfortunately on a ranch, that's not how it works." While she feels like she does have a good work-life balance as a teacher, such as not grading at home, she knows that the ranch is constant work. Nevertheless, she explained that if she is working on her and her husband's ranch or her parents, she counts it as family time even if it's still working. She enjoys coming home from her job as a teacher and working with her family. She added, "that's a good thing, I like it. I love it."

Overall, Emily describes hard work as, "showing up every day and being consistent." She added that working hard just for one day does not count, and "that's not how I raised." Emily was raised to show up every day and work hard day after day, no matter the task. Through her story episodes, *working on the ranch*, *ranch influence*, *outside involvement*, *pride*, *needed support*, *parents support*, and *work-life*, Emily highlighted the pride and challenges of working on a ranch and how it influenced her today. While she is grateful for her parents' support and what they've taught her about hard work, she wished she would have had more support from instructors. Still, Emily is proud to work in production agriculture. She said, "it's a good life, it really is." She learned that "family comes first" on the ranch and the ranch is a part of the family, so the ranch comes first.

### Korey

Korey had seven story episodes including *working on the farm*, *farm influence*, *involvement*, *work-life*, *support from parents*, *feeling pressure*, and *faith*. Korey was the youngest participant at age 19. He is currently enrolled in a two-year program in carpentry and construction, with the goal of eventually returning to his family's farm. He family owns beef cattle, runs commercial corn and soybean and some alfalfa. He is from the Midwest part of the United States and continues to work on his family's farm whenever he can.

Korey began working on the farm at a young age, describing two story episodes, *working on the farm* and *farm influence*. While his documented labor hours started around 14, he described how he was out on the farm starting around three years old by saying he has been working since, "I've been able to strap on the boots." He added to the amount of time he puts on the farm by saying, "Growing up, let's put it this way, if I wasn't in school and I wasn't competing in a sport, and there was daylight, I was working." For example, he explained he would always groan when there was a snow day at school and added, "you are working double the hours because you have cows and calves you have to go check on." Yet on the farm, he said, "my responsibilities are to do as I'm told." By working on the farm, it influenced his decision to attend a two-year university. He said,

When it came time to choosing a college, it's not that I couldn't handle the books or the academics, I was a straight A student and valedictorian, but it was more of I knew that I would do better if I went to a place that I can learn with my hands and that was the choice I made to go into the carpentry industry or the construction industry.

Korey appreciated learning with hands, and it is because of his time on the farm that he learned to work and succeeded by working with his hands. Now, he wants to succeed in working with an industry that is done with your hands. Eventually, he wants to use the skills he learned from the trades on the farm and in his community.

In addition to working on the farm, Korey is involved in numerous activities in and out of school. He particularly enjoys hunting and does it whenever he can, he said he enjoys the opportunity to, “get to see the world wake up.” And describes it as the most energizing experience. Because of his involvement, he said, “there are not too many days of rest where I’m at.” Korey sometimes struggles with his work-life balance; he said, “It’s terrible balance, but you can’t really balance, you just have to do what is higher priority at the moment.” He added that ultimately, “that’s okay because it will get done.” Moreover, “sometimes you can’t miss work for life.” While he does not feel he has a lot of time off, he appreciates it when he does. He learned this appreciation for both work and time off from his parents, who found it important to have quality time with family. He explained that while there is always something that comes up, his parents would just pick a time for the family to spend together and figure it out with the farm. He said he, “learned that with my dad, sometimes you just gotta do things.”

Korey’s parents were a significant influence on his life choices for higher education and working on the farm. He described his parents’ work as, “They don’t stop. That’s the thing, they just grit their teeth, even when they’re hurting, when they feel like quitting, they don’t. They keep going through.” Korey’s parents taught him that, “hard work comes from grit. It comes from having hope and having grit and faith.” He sees that hope, grit, and faith in his parents and appreciates all that his parents have done to help their family succeed. He described a story about holiday celebrations by saying, “Christmas mornings, my dad wakes up and gets out to try to get chores done before lunch so we can spend it together as a family.” He acknowledges that “In order to have these memorable moments as a family, there must come work.”

While he appreciates his parents, he added that sometimes there is pressure put on him to come back to the farm. Korey is the youngest of four in his family, and he described, “My family is kind of looking for me to be the one to come back and succeed a lot of things.” He added, “I was the one who showed the most interest in the farm.” While he felt pressure from his family, he knows they never meant for it to come off as pressure. He explained this by saying, “It’s kind of a weird type of pressure because I have the want to go there, but I realized there are so many open opportunities, and I could almost fit in anywhere I want to go.” Yet, he added to this story episode by saying, “They [his parents] can’t live what they want until I come in and pull the weights.” Korey knows his parents would support him if he decided not to come back, but he knows that if he does come back, that it will be permanent. He said, “when you dig your roots in there, uprooting it would be kind of a mess.”

He added another sense of pressure when deciding on higher education. He said, “There has been this sad stigmatism surrounding the trade schools and getting an associate degree, with the idea it is for the people that weren’t good enough.” Korey feels as if he must justify his decision. He furthered his explanation by saying, “Trades have been looked at as those are people who can’t get their nose in the books.” However, he said, “I am blessed to have a family who encourages me to pursue my interests and passions.” Still Korey wants others to recognize that going into the trades leads to opportunities. He explained, “It’s not that I was quitting, it’s that I was pursuing.”

While Korey feels this pressure, he knows and appreciates that his sense of work is rooted in his faith. He described his personal testimony and the faith story episode by saying,

This doesn’t pertain to everybody, but this is a part of my own, personal testimony. A lot of this hard work and a lot of my family’s fortunes could not have been done without our faith. We believe in a loving God who provides us with gifts, talents, strengths, and wealth. Wealth is a worldly thing, and it comes and goes, but we are currently blessed with it, but the ability to work hard we believe comes from our creator. He worked hard for six days, and on the seventh, he rested, and we try to take the seventh day of rest the best we can, sometimes it doesn’t happen. We are given gifts, and we are to use them to glorify his kingdom. That is our belief. That is another reason we continue to work hard because we

believe that in the future, we will have eternal glory and we will live in a paradise. And so, to put in all the effort we can to not only better our own lives, but to glorify his kingdom.

Faith is important for Korey and his family. He says, “Faith is what carries you over the top, in our opinion, to work the hardest you ever have.” He continued to emphasize he knows it is not the same for everyone, but faith is what gives his family the reason to farm.

Combined, these story episodes share Korey’s relation to hard work. He said working hard “comes in when you give it your all, and more than that.” He included the difference between working hard and hard work; he said, “You can work hard, but hard work is when you push past the point of exhaustion and the point of, I want to quit.” He continued, “You can work hard all day, but where hard work comes in is when the work gets too hard, and you push past.” Korey accredits his definition of hard work to his parents and working on the farm.

### **Meganarrative**

In addition to the owners or operators of an agricultural operation, the hard work required of a farm or ranch is represented by the young adults who work on the operation as well (Cassidy & McGrath, 2014; Chiswell, 2014). While the stories came from different agricultural industries and different parts of the United States, when combined, the meganarrative is evident that the attachment to hard work translates from one’s background in production agriculture to young adults’ everyday lives. The young adults described hard work as giving it their all, like Lauren, who explained “putting your time, your effort, your heart, and your soul into an area you want to see improved.” Tyler expanded by adding a hard-working person is, “a person that is willing to help everybody he can, when he can, and not think he is entitled to anything.” Additionally, Leah described,

I think that my definition of hard work is someone who busts their tail and doesn't stop until the job is done. And I'm not proud of that. I'm not proud of my definition of that, because I believe that people can still work from 8 to 5 and have good work/balance. I believe they are hard workers, and I realize now that I'm not proud of my definition of what hard work is.

The hard work that young adults put into the farm or ranch they grew up on reflects their parents’ work ethic as well. Such as Leah who explained, “My parents don’t have any plans of retiring, so I can’t have any plans of retiring.” And Korey who said, “I see my dad putting blood, sweat, and tears into this farm.” Emily continued with adding how her parents always said, “When in doubt, put your boots on and walk out the door.” While in the stories, the parents are very supportive of the young adults and encourage them to complete higher education and explore other aspects of life, the young adults still feel intrinsic pressure to perform like their parents.

Young adults who grew up on production agriculture have poor work-life balance skills, are involved in agricultural and non-agricultural pursuits, have feelings of guilt for leaving their operations or taking breaks from working, and put intrinsic pressure on themselves to achieve the highest quality of work. However, they take pride in their work ethic and how they were raised on an agricultural operation, overpowering the feelings of guilt or pressure. Growing up on a production agriculture operation influenced their decisions within higher education and affected their current work.

### **Discussion**

The use of narrative inquiry shared the stories of the participants to encourage the practice of student-centered learning in higher education. Additionally, it added context that can be used for policy and theory involved in production agriculture. Methodologically, the use of narrative inquiry allowed for the

stories of the participants to be shared. The use of story episodes, small stories, and meganarrative, allowed for stories that may not have a complete beginning-middle-end to be examined and concluded to impact practice, policy, and theory (Acosta et al., 2019; Olson & Craig, 2009). The participants' have varying story episodes within their small stories, but their meganarrative is very similar even though they grew up in different industries and in different parts of the United States. The participants lived experiences in production agriculture impacted their perception of hard work. Young adults who grew up in production agriculture operations can be seen to have poor work-life balance skills, are involved in agriculture and non-agricultural pursuits, have feelings of guilt for leaving their operations or taking breaks from working, and put intrinsic pressure on themselves to achieve the highest quality of work. The stress and pressure from the agricultural operation transferred to the participants and impacted their decisions in education and professional careers (Steup et al., 2022). Yet, they take pride in their work and have a deep appreciation for the opportunity to live and work on a farm or ranch. The young adults in this study took their experiences in production agriculture and projected their definitions of hard work into their education and professional careers. Production agriculture is a challenging industry to be involved in when life and work frequently become intertwined (Fraser et al., 2005). As higher education educators, we should be considerate of our students' small stories and that could affect their learning in and out of the classroom. Further, there is an opportunity to adapt curriculum and teaching methods, such as getting to know students more, using experiential teaching models, or inquiry-based approaches that can support academic success (Baldock et al., 2022; Coleman et al., 2024).

### **Recommendations**

Within the practice of higher education, particularly within the agricultural classes or majors, it is common to have students similar to Lauren, Leah, Tyler, Emily, or Korey. Educators should recognize the intrinsic pressure and high demands students place upon themselves to have high-quality work. Further, acknowledging the feelings of guilt sometimes associated with students having to be away from the agricultural operation. Participants appreciated when instructors were flexible and understanding of their situations. Therefore, higher education educators should continue listening to students' needs. In creating assignments and creating an effective learning environment, higher education educators should consider the background of their students and create applicable materials.

The implications on policy and theory can be seen within the agricultural industry itself. For policy, as young family members most typically succeed production agriculture operations, it is important to recognize that the mental and physical stress of production agriculture stretches further than the owner and operator, and it impacts the young adults involved in the operation (Cassiday & McGrath, 2014; Chiswell, 2014; Fraser et al., 2015). The participants in this narrative inquiry appreciated their parents' support. However, they can sometimes feel pressure during succession planning. Throughout the succession planning process, young adults' stories should be considered to best support them in the transition from student to employee to owner.

The results of the meganarrative align with social science theories such as Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986). Social cognitive theory describes how personal factors, environmental influences, and behavior interact (Bandura, 1986). The participants described each of these facets within their story and then aligned them to aspects of physical and mental stress. Further, theoretical considerations should also include young adults in their studies of the mental stress of production agriculture. As multiple participants pointed out within their stories, agriculture and young adults should not be left out of the conversation regarding work and mental health.

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