

Western State FFA State Officer Selection Process: A Case Study Analysis

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Abstract

This multi-case study examined how state-level FFA nominating committees in one Western state determine “quality” youth leadership. Three committees (2017–2019) were investigated through focus groups with student members, individual interviews with past officers, a chair, and an advisor, and document analysis of publicly available selection materials. Across committees, four overarching traits consistently signaled leadership quality: selflessness (member focus, humility, service orientation), people skills (relatability, outgoingness, clear communication), growth mindset (genuineness, introspection, professionalism), and commitment (preparation, perseverance, prioritization of FFA duties). Although public materials emphasize six traits: responsibility, problem solving, character, teamwork/interaction, communication, and ambition, committees blended structured scoring with subjective judgment and informal observations. Members reported tension between objectivity (trait rubrics, consistent scoring, fairness) and subjectivity (instincts about authenticity and “fit”) and expressed skepticism that interviews, shaped by anxiety, confidence, prior preparation, and interviewer biases, fully capture candidates’ leadership. Findings indicate value in embedding ethics across all assessed traits, defining and disseminating clear trait descriptors and behavioral examples to both committees and candidates, and strengthening interview design to improve rating consistency. Practical recommendations include adding a team-interaction round, diversifying committee backgrounds, and providing developmental feedback to candidates to align with FFA’s leadership and growth mission. Future research should examine how committee composition and training shape selections and compare processes across states to identify best practices.

Introduction

Leadership exists to achieve and sustain societal pursuits important for the common good (Caulfield, 2013). Northouse (2012) describes leadership as a process by which individuals influence a group toward a common goal. Numerous leadership definitions have led to diverse approaches in conceptualization, theory development, and practice (Hernandez et al., 2011). Commonalities among leadership definitions include foci on traits, abilities, skills, behaviors, relationships, and influence, though clarity on leadership expectations in specific situations remains elusive (Northouse, 2012). Furthermore, research addressing the identification and development of future leaders remains limited (Northouse, 2012).

In the United States, leadership development is addressed through various programs, courses, and organizations (Boyd, 2011). Many organizations identify leadership as integral to their mission, with

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significant emphasis on youth leadership due to its potential societal impact (Horstmeier & Nall, 2007). Youth leadership development occurs through community-based organizations such as 4-H, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts, and formal educational programs like FFA and FCCLA (Horstmeier & Nall, 2007). Among school-based organizations, the National FFA Organization, with over 1,027,000 members nationwide, is prominent, aiming to develop premier leadership through activities focused on community-based leadership competencies, soft-skill development, and character (National FFA, 2025). Leadership positions within FFA contribute to increased self-regulation (Lerner & Lerner, 2013), belonging, and self-esteem (Rose et al., 2016), directly influencing societal progression (Lerner et al., 2009).

FFA selects leaders, referred to as officers, at national, state, and local levels through nominating committees (National FFA, 2025). Officer responsibilities are clearly outlined in the official FFA manual, yet clarity regarding quality leadership and purposeful selection criteria remains limited. Inconsistencies in leadership conceptualization and selection underline the need to understand how quality leadership is determined in organizations like FFA (Horstmeier & Nall, 2007). Although research by Bruce and Ricketts (2007) on national-level FFA nominating committees identified norm adherence, it did not address the consistency or explicit definition of quality leadership. Given the significant societal impact of youth organizations and FFA's leadership emphasis, further examination of how nominating committees perceive and determine leadership quality at all levels, especially at the state level, is necessary.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore perspectives of FFA nominating committees at the state level who are responsible for selecting youth to serve in leadership roles. How the nominating committees view potential candidates, which attributes they value, and how they define those attributes was examined in depth to gain a greater understanding of the leadership selection process in the selected Western State. The information gleaned from this study can be used by future nominating committees, leaders, and state FFA staff to inform decisions related to the leadership selection of state officers. The following central research question guided the study: How do Western State FFA nominating committees determine quality youth leadership? Secondary research questions included: (1) What attributes do Western State nominating committees' value for quality youth leadership? and (2) How do Western State nominating committees determine if state officer candidates possess these attributes?

Literature and Guiding Frameworks

Before exploring how Western State FFA nominating committees evaluate quality leadership, it is essential to understand the levels of leadership in the National FFA Organization and the officer selection process. The National FFA Organization is comprised of three primary levels: national, state, and local (National FFA, 2025). Some states have additional regional or district-level leadership teams. At the national level, there are six elected officers and a Board of Directors, while state levels vary in the number of officers, their duties, and elected positions (National FFA, 2025). State FFA Associations also include advisors and executive secretaries, often State Department of Education employees (Western State FFA, 2020). At the local level, each chapter is guided by an adult advisor, and all chapters are chartered through the state level (National FFA, 2025). This study focuses on state-level officer selection by nominating committees.

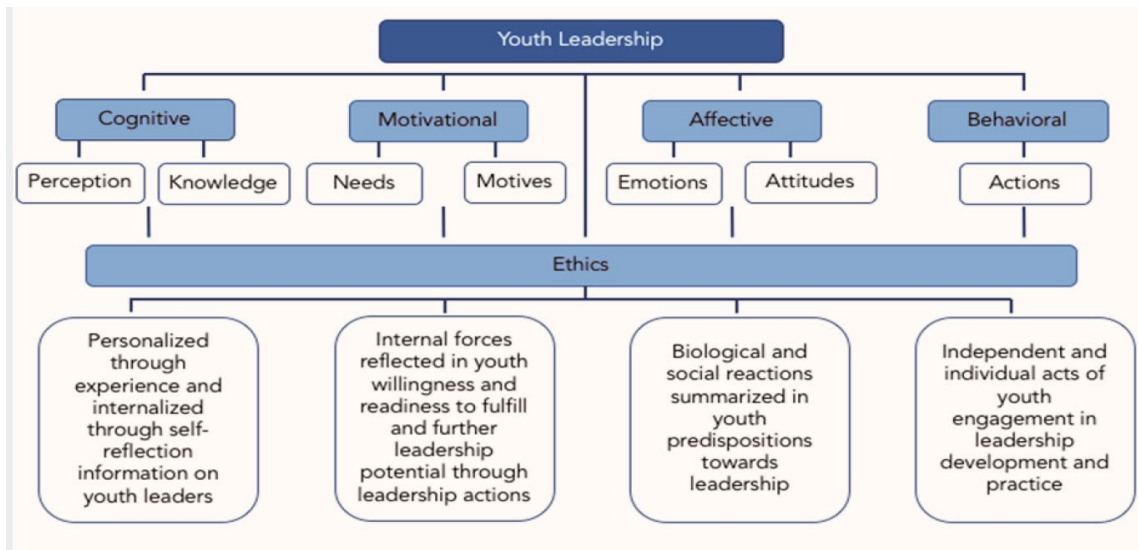
While duties differ by state, common responsibilities for state officers include representing the state, local, and national levels (National FFA, 2025). In the Western State, officers must fulfill expectations such as student service, team-centered attitudes, personal development, moral conduct, public life management, and time balance (Western State FFA, 2020). Candidates must maintain positive relationships with stakeholders, advocate for agriculture, and serve as role models (Western State FFA, 2020).

Conceptual Framework

To conceptualize leadership in this context, we utilized the Youth Leadership Framework developed by Sherif (2019) (see Figure 1) which describes youth leadership utilizing cognitive, motivational, affective, and behavioral domains, all anchored within an ethical domain. Together, these five domains provide a comprehensive outline of youth leadership development that encompasses multiple existing theories of youth leadership (Sherif, 2019). The cognitive domain includes youth perception and knowledge of leadership. Youth can define leadership and link it to leadership positions, characteristics, and community development (Sherif, 2019). The motivational domain relates to fulfilling both personal and organizational needs and the drive for personal development in leadership roles, influencing youth’s appreciation for leadership when they see its positive impact on group morale (Sherif, 2019). The affective domain reflects how youth’s emotions and attitudes toward leadership are influenced by interactions with others, where positive experiences foster confidence and negative ones create fear or hesitation (Sherif, 2019). The behavioral domain encompasses actions reflective of leadership development, with growth occurring as youth practice and apply leadership skills (Sherif, 2019). Ethical leadership anchors all other domains, focusing on how leadership is applied according to values and character (Sherif, 2019). Ethical decisions strengthen a leader’s ability to influence others (Northouse, 2012).

Figure 1

Youth Leadership Framework (Sherif, 2019)



In its entirety, Sherif’s (2019) Youth Leadership Framework provides a comprehensive conceptualization of youth leadership. It includes action towards personal development, self-realization, and community development, all important components in the existing literature for youth leadership (Sherif, 2019). This framework was chosen to guide our study because of the focus on youth leadership specifically and the incorporation of a variety of factors important in youth leadership literature.

Theoretical Framework

In addition to conceptualizing youth leadership, it is also important to frame the selection process for electing Western State FFA officers through the nominating committee. The Interviewee Framework

developed by Huffcutt et al. (2011) was used to frame the forms of communication that occur during the selection process and the interactions that occur between interviewee performance and interviewer ratings (see Figure 2). *Interviewee performance* is seen as an intermediary component between *interviewee attributes* and *interviewer ratings*. Therefore, it is important to identify the perspectives and corresponding definitions of leadership used by the nominating committee (i.e., interviewers) and how state officer candidates (i.e., interviewees) communicate leadership traits to the nominating committee.

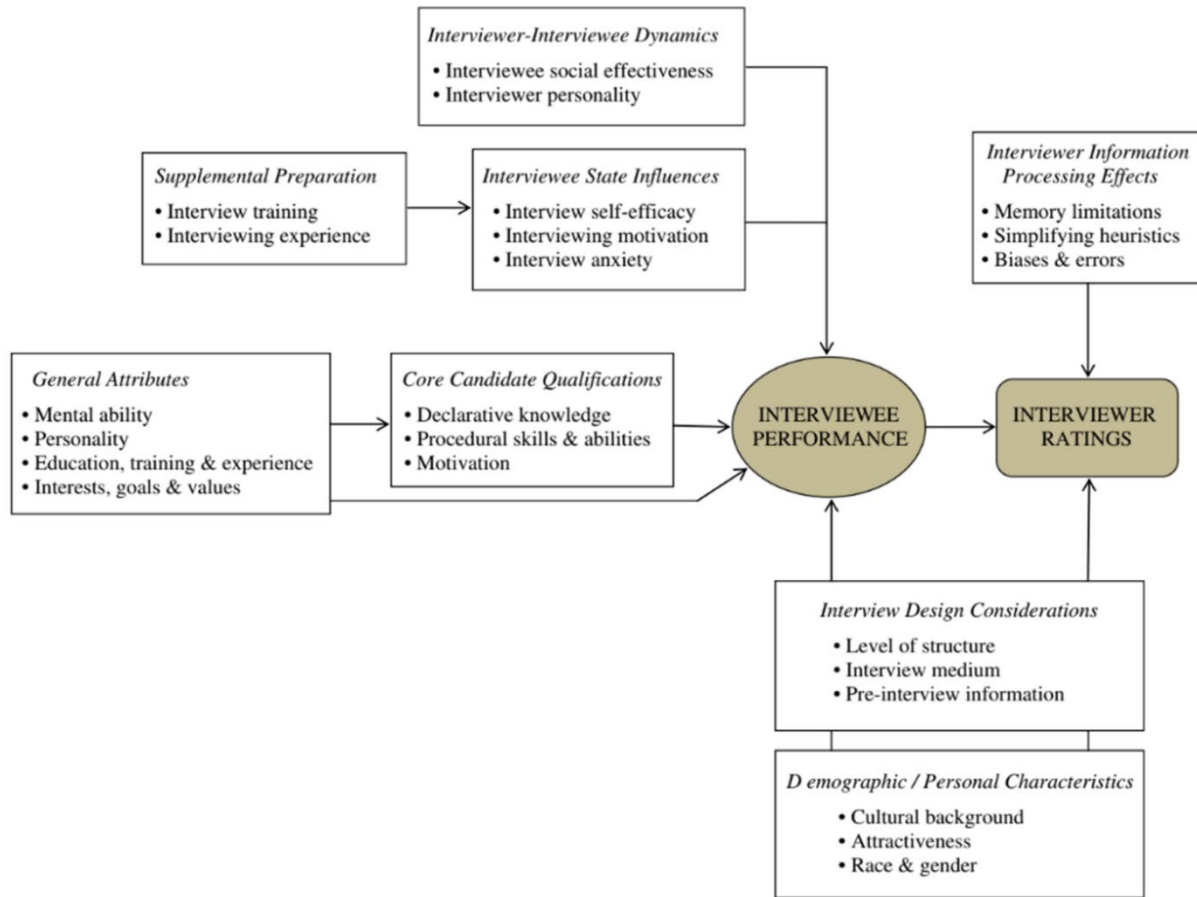
Within performance appraisal literature, it is often concluded supervisor reflections are imperfect representations of actual job performance (Huffcutt et al., 2011). Huffcutt et al. (2011) proposes interviewer ratings are also imperfect appraisals of interview performance. While interviewee performance should reflect skills and attributes, it is influenced by many external factors. Through the Interviewee Framework, Huffcutt et al. (2011) encourages consideration of these factors before drawing interview conclusions, categorizing them as influencing interviewer ratings, interviewee performance, or both.

Internal interviewee factors include general attributes and core candidate qualifications. General attributes reflect candidate's traits, experiences, and mental capacity. These influence core qualifications, meaning what candidates know, can do, and how much effort they will expend. These factors shape interview performance but may not be accurately conveyed (Huffcutt et al., 2011). Three additional factors influence performance but are not typically evaluated: interviewer–interviewee dynamics, supplemental preparation, and interviewee state influences. Interviewer and interviewee dynamics, rooted in social influence theory, suggest that interpersonal interactions affect both parties (Huffcutt et al., 2011). For example, an interviewer's personality may influence interviewee sociability. Supplemental preparation, such as training or prior experience, affects how effectively interviewees present themselves, regardless of actual job suitability (Huffcutt et al., 2011). Interviewee state influences, including anxiety and confidence, also impact performance (Huffcutt et al., 2011).

On the interviewer side, ratings are shaped by information processing effects, which describe how well interviewers interpret the interview. Biases and limited processing capacity may skew judgment, as interviewers interpret responses through their own lens (Huffcutt et al., 2011). Two factors impact both performance and ratings: demographic and personal characteristics, and interview design considerations. Characteristics such as race, gender identity, culture, and attractiveness may influence outcomes due to the similarity-attraction paradigm (Huffcutt et al., 2011). Interview design also matters. The layout, communication medium, and pre-interview information affect candidate performance and evaluation (Huffcutt et al., 2011). Interview mediums, such as face-to-face, phone, or video, can elicit different responses and outcomes (Huffcutt et al., 2011).

Figure 2

Interviewee Framework (Huffcutt et al., 2011)



Ultimately, the Interviewee Framework presents a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping interviews and outcomes (Huffcutt et al., 2011). In evaluating how FFA nominating committees assess candidates, the most observable elements will be those related to the interviewer role, including interview design considerations, demographic and personal characteristics, and information processing effects. However, interviewee-related components, such as core qualifications, general attributes, supplemental preparation, and state influences, may also emerge through nominating committees’ perceptions.

Methods

We employed a multi-case study research design where each nominating committee served as a single case. Case studies are intensive analyses bounded by space and time that often examine groups or events (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). Sociological case studies are focused on society, and one facet of sociological research focuses on the collective behavior of organized groups of individuals (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). Since the Western State FFA nominating committee is an organized group of individuals who must come to a collective decision, a sociological case study was deemed appropriate.

We approached this case study from a pragmatic lens. Pragmatism focuses on the outcome of

research; the actions and consequences because of the inquiry (Creswell, 2013). Conducting research using a pragmatic lens involves approaching the research question with multiple methods of data collection, data sources, and a focus on practical applications of the findings (Creswell, 2013). We examined the most recent years of nominating committees to increase the practical application of research to development.

It is important to address our positionality to disclose our expertise and potential biases (Creswell, 2013). Our research team consisted of three individuals: one researcher was a past FFA state officer candidate who participated in the interview process, served as a state FFA officer, chaired a nominating committee, and trained multiple state officer candidates over the past five years. In addition to training FFA members to run for state office, this researcher has also trained individuals selected as state officers, worked closely with Western State FFA staff, and knew many participants personally prior to conducting this research. Another researcher was a faculty member at the Western State's land-grant university. The third researcher was a past state officer who previously served on the nominating committee.

Description of the Case

The nominating committee is responsible for key decisions during the state officer selection process (Western State FFA, 2020). It consists of thirteen individuals: one past state officer committee chair, one adult advisor, three past state officers, and eight current Western State FFA members. The State FFA Executive Secretary appoints the advisor and three past officers, while the Executive Secretary and current state president jointly select the committee chair, directly influencing five committee positions (Western State FFA, 2020). To maintain consistency, we studied three separate nominating committees occurring under the same Executive Secretary.

Focusing on recent committees allowed us to include diverse perspectives, capturing participants who were either still in college or recently graduated, thus enhancing recall accuracy. Study participants had served on nominating committees from 2017 to 2019. Prior to interviews, committee members received candidate applications and attended a training session. Each committee was disbanded after selections were completed (State FFA Executive Secretary, Personal Communication, 2019).

Information about the Western State FFA officer selection process is publicly accessible on the organization's website, including candidate applications, a study guide, behavioral interview questions, written test examples, and a candidate workshop PowerPoint (Western State FFA, 2020). Officer candidates undergo an application process, a written test, writing exercise, and six interview rounds: individual speed interviews, a panel interview, agricultural education and agricultural issues conversations, workshop facilitation, and public speaking (Western State FFA, 2020). An optional seventh "committee's choice" round is available if the committee needs additional information. Candidates are evaluated on ambition, character, problem-solving, interaction/teamwork, responsibility, and communication, as outlined in the candidate study guide. Definitions for these traits are not explicitly provided, but a bank of behavioral questions serves as evaluation examples (Western State FFA, 2020).

Participants

We interviewed thirteen individuals (see Table 1) in a focus group format, with three focus groups in total. Each focus group included four to five of the eight nominating committee members from a single year who were high school students during the time they served on the nominating committee. The former high school students were separated from the other committee members for two reasons. First, the advisors, past state officers, and committee chairs served in executive roles during each nominating committee and could create a power dynamic during the focus groups. Second, the advisors, past state officers, and committee chairs have more years of experience in addition to their executive roles that provides a different perspective of the nominating committee process.

Table 1

Focus Group Participants

Pseudonym	Nominating Committee Information	
	Role	Year Served
Catheryn Fenway	Student	2017
Michael Conway	Student	2017
Caleb Sanders	Student	2017
Kayla Corners	Student	2017
Boston Rhoades	Student	2017
Jocelyn Wood	Student	2018
Karlee Zip	Student	2018
Savannah Gold	Student	2018
Hugh Royal	Student	2018
Sandy Alderson	Student	2019
Randy Albright	Student	2019
Fiona Karston	Student	2019
Gilbert Dunn	Student	2019

In addition to the three focus groups, we individually interviewed seven of the ten nominating committee members from all three years who were past state officers, nominating committee chairs, or advisors at the time of interviews (see Table 2). Their experiences and unique roles during the officer selection process provided a different perspective from the former high school students.

Table 2

Individual Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Nominating Committee Information	
	Role	Year(s) Served
Tanya Rigsby	Past State Officer	2017
John Boyer	Past State Officer	2017
Anthony Colter	Past State Officer	2017, 2018
Bart Mathews	Past State Officer	2018
Julio Kerry	Past State Officer	2019
Tristen Barton	Past State Officer	2019
Antonia Harold	Committee Chair	2019

Data Sources and Collection

We collected all data during Spring 2020 using three sources: focus groups, individual interviews, and document analysis. Utilizing multiple data collection methods reduced biases and chance associations, facilitating triangulation (Maxwell, 2013), and allowed for a more thorough narrative to address the complexity of the variables studied (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011).

We obtained committee member lists and contact information from the Western State FFA Executive Secretary for the focus groups. Three focus groups convened via Zoom in March, April, and June, each lasting approximately two hours and recorded for transcription. Zoom enabled participation from members with scheduling conflicts or residing out of state. The semi-structured interviews involved open-ended questions aligned with Sherif’s (2019) Youth Leadership Framework and Huffcutt et al.’s (2011) Interviewee Framework. Individual interviews complemented the focus groups by examining personal perspectives beyond group dynamics (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). We conducted seven individual

interviews via Zoom with members experienced in multiple nominating committees. Interviews lasted approximately one hour, followed a semi-structured format, and were transcribed.

The final data source was public documents related to the nominating committee selection process available on the Western State FFA website. We analyzed references to qualities, skills, duties, or characteristics associated with officer selection. Any leadership attribute identified was categorized into domains from Sherif's (2019) Youth Leadership Framework and addressed elements of Huffcutt et al.'s (2011) Interviewee Framework.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

A three-tiered coding process was used to analyze data from interviews, focus groups, and documents, organizing text into categories supported by other data and labeled as themes (Creswell, 2013). Initially, we open coded each transcription to identify concepts inductively. Inductive logic allows abstract themes to emerge from data sets (Creswell, 2013). We continuously checked, modified, or removed codes against additional data until comprehensive themes were established. Employing inductive logic first ensured all relevant concepts were included, even those not explicitly captured by a framework. Creswell (2013) emphasizes pairing inductive with deductive logic for thorough analysis. Thus, we compared inductively developed themes to the Interviewee Framework (Huffcutt et al., 2011) and the Youth Leadership Framework (Sherif, 2019) deductively. Final themes were developed from both coding processes and reported as study findings (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011).

To increase trustworthiness, we implemented four strategies: triangulation of data sources, memo taking, rich and thick descriptions, and member checking. Qualitative research must address potential threats to trustworthiness (Maxwell, 2013) and employing at least two such strategies is recommended (Creswell, 2013). We triangulated data through focus groups, individual interviews, and document analysis. Focus groups captured collective perspectives, while individual interviews allowed personal views uninfluenced by group dynamics. Document analysis provided a non-human data source. Memo taking involved field notes and capturing key phrases, words, or ideas during and after interviews and focus groups. This approach facilitated initial category creation, ensured connection among concepts discussed, guided subsequent questioning, and prevented misconceptions from any single interview or focus group (Creswell, 2013). Rich and thick description was provided through direct participant quotations from interview and focus group transcriptions. Lastly, member checking ensured our interpretations accurately reflected participants' original thoughts and perceptions (Maxwell, 2013).

Findings

Three overarching themes emerged from the data. First, the Nominating Committees' Overarching Priorities for Candidate Selection theme describes what attributes nominating committees sought in state officer candidates. Second, the Objectivity and Subjectivity of the Nominating Committee Selection Process theme explains how the nominating committees determined whether the candidates had the desired attributes. Third, the Nominating Committees' Skepticism towards the Selection Process theme presents issues inherent within the selection process. The three primary themes together reveal what attributes were valued, how attributes were determined, and potential issues present within the current selection process.

Nominating Committees' Overarching Priorities for Candidate Selection

Western State FFA nominating committees prioritized different traits when selecting leaders, some of which connected to the six traits laid out in the state officer selection guide (responsibility, problem-solving, character, teamwork/interaction, communication, and ambition), and others that emerged organically during the process. While specific candidate attributes sought varied, all the Western State FFA

nominating committees prioritized four over-arching traits in state officer candidates: selflessness, people skills, growth mindset, and commitment. Each of these subthemes is further broken down into specific attributes indicative of the trait. It is also important to note that while some nominating committee members used varying terms to describe a particular trait, these subthemes represent the essence of what a state officer candidate should be from the collective perspectives of the committees.

Selflessness as a Desirable Trait

Out of all the traits discussed with participants, selflessness was the most consistently emphasized by nominating committee members and weighed most heavily in electing state officers. Among the six traits in the Western State FFA officer study guide, selflessness aligns most closely with character. Though not synonymous, both relate through the lens of ethics. The Youth Leadership Framework highlights the ethical domain, making the committees' emphasis on selflessness consistent with the framework, while also aligning with the motivational domain by reflecting candidates' intentions in running for state office (Sherif, 2019). This trait was primarily demonstrated through member focus, a desire to serve, and humility.

Committees considered member focus the most important aspect of selflessness. Candidates motivated to lead for the benefit of members were favored, while those expressing ambitions for higher office were seen as self-centered. Randy, a 2019 student member, said, "If you're there for national office, then you're in it for the absolute wrong reason. If you're going to be a state officer, you need to be there for the students and the organization because that's who needs you." Committees assessed this trait through candidates' reasons for running and their informal interactions with members. Julio, a 2019 past state officer, asked, "With the informal exchanges ..., the only things I was looking for then was can you make the [FFA] members feel comfortable around you? Can you make it about them [FFA members]?" The more candidates discussed and engaged positively with members, the more member focused they appeared.

Humility was shown when candidates downplayed their own achievements and emphasized others. Use of inclusive language and balanced self-reference was important. Bart, a 2018 past state officer, explained, "When I hear kids that talk about 'I', you know that's a red flag for me." While candidates had to talk about themselves, committees looked for balance. Julio noted, "Candidates needed to keep that focus of trying to make it about a member, but at the same time, because it is an interview, you need to make it at least somewhat about you." Tristen, a 2019 past state officer, gave an example of humility: "There were some candidates like [an elected officer] that, to him, leadership was so selfless. And he talked about it in every response he gave. He would mention himself, but it was more talking about others..." Committees ultimately chose candidates who could effectively present themselves while staying focused on others.

The desire to serve was another expression of selflessness. This extended beyond member focus to include a commitment to the community, FFA, and the agriculture industry. Boston, a 2017 student member, described the distinction: "That [serving members] is a wonderful bonus, but sometimes you want to serve because your passionate about agriculture and you want to continue to spread the message to students who might not be from the same background as you are. To me, it was important that you came in there and you wanted to give back to agriculture and give back to something that gave so much to you." The phrase "give back" frequently appeared in interviews, especially regarding candidate motivation. Whether through member support or a desire to "give back" to FFA and agriculture, selflessness was prioritized and recognized through member focus, humility, and service orientation.

People Skills as a Desirable Trait

People skills were the second most emphasized trait by nominating committees when evaluating state officer candidates. According to the state officer application packet, officers are expected to "...maintain positive relationships with members, agribusiness organizations, educational organizations,

personnel within the agribusiness sector, the public and others interested in Agricultural Education and the FFA" (Western State FFA, 2020, p.16). Of the six responsibilities listed, four involve direct interaction with members and stakeholders, reinforcing the importance of people skills. In the Youth Leadership Framework, these skills align with the behavioral domain, which addresses interactions, and overlap with the affective domain, which concerns emotions and attitudes (Sherif, 2019). People skills supported two of the six listed traits in the state officer application: communication and teamwork/interaction. Candidates demonstrating these skills were described as relatable, outgoing, and communicative.

Relatability was valued for its role in helping state officers socially connect with members. Committees wanted candidates who made members feel comfortable. Kayla, a 2017 student member, explained, "People are going to make mistakes for the rest of their lives. They [state officer candidates] also need to be able to relate to other students, who are going to make mistakes too." Relatability included shared interests, understanding of different experiences, and personality similarities. Boston, a 2017 student member, said, "They're [candidate] quirky and awkward. Sometimes that's not always identified as a leader necessarily, but it was good for us as a committee to work through what type of member that would cater to." Committees acknowledged the diversity of Western State FFA members and sought officers who could connect with many types of individuals.

In addition to being relatable, it was important for candidates to be outgoing. Candidates were described as individuals who were comfortable meeting new people and initiating conversations. Tanya, a 2017 past state officer, noted, "Okay, are you [a candidate] just talking to students from your chapter or are you making an effort to learn to talk to other people?" Committees looked for candidates who engaged not only with familiar faces but also reached out to new members.

Strong communication was the final key element of people skills. Effective candidates could clearly express their ideas and be easily understood. Randy, a 2019 student member, explained, "Candidates might have struggled with getting their ideas in their heads out verbally...We understood what they were trying to say, but not every FFA member is going to really read into what they're saying." Given that state officers are expected to speak at banquets and conferences statewide (Western State FFA, 2020), clear communication was critical. Candidates perceived as poor communicators were less likely to be selected due to concerns about their ability to connect with members and stakeholders. People skills, including relatability, outgoingness, and communication, played a significant role in committee decision-making.

Growth Mindset as a Desirable Trait

Thirdly, nominating committees valued candidates with a growth mindset. A growth mindset describes individuals who pursue further development of skills, knowledge, and understanding (Gupta, 2013). While not explicitly listed among the six traits in the Western State FFA officer application, a growth mindset aligns with the motivational domain of Sherif's (2019) Youth Leadership Framework, which reflects youth's willingness to develop their leadership potential. Candidates with growth mindsets were described as genuine, introspective, and professional. Committees viewed this as a progression: candidates must first be genuine in understanding who they are, then introspective in evaluating strengths and areas of improvement, and finally professional in their behavior as aspiring state officers.

Genuineness was linked to a candidate's ability to be honest about areas for self-improvement. Hugh, a 2019 student member, said, "It's being able to be vulnerable and genuine, about especially the hard stuff, that really, truly allows state officers to connect with members." Kayla, a 2017 student member, added, "If they [candidates] identified what they didn't know, I also found that as an attractive trait because it showed some self-awareness." Committees believed that recognizing current limitations was a key first step toward leadership growth.

Introspection demonstrated a candidate's willingness to improve. John, a 2017 past state officer, said, "Tons of personal growth happened in that year [state officer year]. But if you're not open to that commitment to grow, you're going to struggle in that position. I think that was the first commandment—to grow." Committees agreed that while certain skills such as public speaking or organizational knowledge could be taught, attributes like authenticity and compassion were harder to develop later. Julio, a 2019 past state officer, noted, "It's so much easier for me, for the organization as a whole, to take a compassionate leader and teach them to be a good speaker than to take a good speaker and teach them to be an engaging leader." Growth was important, but the traits needing development also had to be teachable.

Professionalism was the final characteristic associated with a growth mindset. John emphasized the balance candidates needed: "They had to balance the perfect amount of being personable, but at the same time, professional." Committees viewed professionalism as a reflection of high personal standards and competence. Savannah, a 2018 student member, described how panel interview attire, though not required to be official dress, still needed to be professional. She said, "State officers don't have time to slack off and kick back at some chapter event, because they're at work. That's their job. They have to be good role models no matter the situation." As representatives of Western State FFA, candidates were expected to demonstrate professionalism through their behavior and appearance in all contexts.

Commitment as a Desirable Trait

The final trait nominating committees sought in state officer candidates was commitment. State office was described as a demanding year of service, requiring resilience and consistent dedication. Julio, a 2019 past state officer, reflected, "Can you [candidates] handle spending over a hundred days at events and things? Can you handle frequently having to be in front of people and interacting with people right after doing 50 nights of driving?" Passion for the FFA, demonstrated through preparation and perseverance, signaled commitment. Of the six traits listed in the Western State FFA officer study guide, commitment aligned most closely with responsibility. Committed candidates were prepared, resilient through challenges, and prioritized FFA responsibilities.

Preparation was a key indicator. Candidates who memorized speeches, planned engaging workshops, and demonstrated knowledge of agriculture and FFA were seen as committed. Antonia, the 2019 nominating committee chair, stated, "They [nominating committee] give you [candidate] most, if not all, the resources that you're going to need. If you still don't know anything about what you're talking about, okay, that one's on you." Similarly, Tanya, a 2017 past state officer, emphasized, "If they weren't prepared, then I knew that passion wasn't there, and they really didn't want this as bad as they said they did." Hugh, a 2018 student member, added, "Those who simply weren't ready and didn't put enough time in before coming, and that's going to show how much effort they're going to put into state office."

Perseverance also indicated commitment. Bart, a 2018 past state officer, explained, "There's a lot of waiting and it's passion that gets you through there [the selection process] ... and if they don't have that passion for the organization or the passion for wanting the position, they burn out through the process." Candidates who endured the rigorous seven-round selection process demonstrated a dedication expected to continue in state office.

Finally, candidates past prioritization of FFA signaled commitment. Through applications and recommendation letters, nominating committees assessed how candidates balanced FFA with other obligations. Jocelyn, a 2018 student member, noted she looked for candidates who, "would take advantage of as many opportunities as they could, but if there was a conflict between the two, that FFA was the priority." While family and religion were acceptable priorities, academics or extracurriculars that appeared to compete with FFA raised concern. John, a 2017 past state officer, commented, "They're [the candidate] super committed to school or something, which isn't a bad thing, but for the role of state office,

it isn't necessarily the best.” Ultimately, candidates were expected to show that FFA was a top priority.

Objectivity and Subjectivity of the Nominating Committee Selection Process

In addition to prioritizing specific traits, interviews and focus groups revealed how nominating committees assessed whether candidates embodied those attributes. While selflessness, people skills, growth mindset, and commitment emerged as top priorities, these traits were not explicitly listed in any public-facing Western State FFA materials. The organization identified six core traits: responsibility, problem-solving, character, teamwork/interaction, communication, and ambition to guide nominating committees throughout the seven interview rounds. Candidates were scored on each of these traits in every round. According to committee members, this scoring system was intended to offer structure and encourage objectivity during the selection process. However, because the trait definitions were open to interpretation, nominating committees often relied on personal judgment and intuition. As a result, members reported using both objective measures and subjective perceptions to make final decisions about candidate selection.

Objectivity within the Selection Process

Most nominating committees believed the selection process should be guided primarily by the six traits to maintain objectivity. Although these traits are not defined in public documents, they are introduced and explained orally during nominating committee training. When asked what qualities were emphasized in state officer candidates, Tristen, a 2019 past state officer, responded, “We learned about six characteristics of a state officer that our questions lead towards: communication, teamwork, involvement, ambition, problem-solving, character, and responsibility.” For each of the seven rounds, nominating committee members received score sheets listing which of the six traits were being evaluated. A score of three indicated the candidate demonstrated the trait, a one indicated the candidate lacked the trait, and a two signaled the trait was present but needed improvement.

For the panel and individual interview rounds, one public document provides example questions tied to each trait. For example, to assess teamwork and responsibility, a committee member might ask, “Give me an example of a time when you faced a disagreement with an individual or on a team. What did you do correctly in the situation, and how could you have handled it better?” (Western State FFA, 2013, p. 4). For communication, a question might be, “Give an example of when you had to present complex information in a simplified manner in order to explain it to others” (Western State FFA, 2013, p. 7). When asked what traits they did not want to see, Antonia, the 2019 nominating committee chair, explained, “It’s a lack of a trait, a character trait, rather than downright I don't want this.” Because negative traits were not formally outlined in public documents, committees relied more on identifying the presence or absence of the six traits. Chairs, past officers, and advisors adhered more strictly to the trait framework compared to student members. Overall, committees aimed to remain objective by scoring only the traits officially promoted in the application and training materials, rather than focusing on subjective impressions or characteristics not clearly defined.

Committee members also believed it was important to eliminate external factors from influencing the selection process. This included any prior personal experiences with candidates, whether positive or negative. Bart, a 2018 past state officer, recalled such an instance: “I knew that they had some negative attributes, but I never said anything, other than to maybe the other adults in the room.” By disregarding prior experiences, committees believed they were better upholding objectivity.

Internal fairness was equally important. Committees tried to treat all candidates consistently, even in small gestures like smiling or offering encouragement. Feelings of compassion were often set aside to preserve fairness. Randy, a 2019 student member, described a moment when the committee was reminded to reevaluate their approach with one struggling candidate:

We [nominating committee] were giving them [candidate] the benefit of the doubt, and probably not evaluating them at the same level of skill as we were some of the other candidates. And once that was made apparent, to all of us, I think it made us realize there cannot be any ounce of uncertainty in these candidates. If we're not evaluating them on the same level of characteristics, then it's not fair.

Subjectivity within the Selection Process

While nominating committees valued objectivity, subjectivity also played a significant role in the selection process. The six traits outlined by Western State FFA served as a guide, but interpretations of those traits varied among committee members. Definitions and evidence of traits like character differed across individuals. Anthony, a 2017 and 2018 past state officer, discussed the trait of character shown through a candidate making a difficult decision. He said, "Their [the candidate's] friend trusted them with the secret, but that person betrayed the secret by telling an adult for the safety of their friend. So, I think that goes into ethics." Another nominating committee member spoke of character demonstrated through honesty. Sandy, a 2019 student member, said, "If we think that they [candidate] seem to be hiding something with their answers, you can kind of tell when someone's lying, when they're giving answers in those situations. Character was fit in with all of the questions."

Although there was little consistency in what the six traits looked like during selection, nominating committees appreciated the flexibility. When asked what a genuine candidate looked like, Julio, a 2019 past state officer, responded, "It is a subjective thing. It is an emotional thing. And I think that has to be that way because ultimately what we're choosing you [the candidate] for is a job that is largely dependent on subjective emotional interactions." Committee members often relied on their instincts rather than specific definitions. The Interviewee Framework (Huffcutt et al., 2011) supports this subjectivity, noting interviewer biases and personality dynamics affect ratings. Hugh, a 2018 student member, shared, "You can really see their eyes light up, and they're talking about this experience that they had and what they want to do during their year of service. And in other ones, you don't see that same spark." Other members described candidates with a "sparkle in their eye," a smile, or "sense of excitement." Some said, "it just felt right" or "they just knew." Savannah, a 2018 student member, also described using instinct to identify character: "I mean, just how they interacted with us. You can kind of just tell they're being honest."

In addition to instinct, informal interactions were also used to assess candidate attributes. Tristen, a 2019 past state officer, elaborated, "I personally liked the little times when I would see them in the elevator or something like that. We weren't really supposed to communicate with them outside of that, but it just kind of naturally happened." Although these interactions were outside the formal selection process, committees found them valuable for revealing candidate qualities in less rehearsed moments.

Intersection of Objectivity and Subjectivity

Nominating committees valued both objectivity and subjectivity in the selection process. The six traits provided structure, consistency, and a baseline for objectivity, yet individual interpretations were seen as essential. Julio, a 2019 past state officer, explained, "Our current nominating committee process evolved out of a feeling years ago amongst advisors in the state that no one understood how officers were selected, and so we tried to create a new process so that everyone could understand." These traits became guidelines, but nominating committees retained the freedom to interpret them based on their instincts and judgment.

Huffcutt's Interviewee Framework (2011) highlights this duality. While Interview Design Considerations provide an objective structure, the interviewer's demographics, background, processing, and interactions bring in subjectivity. This reflected nominating committee practice. Members followed interview structure and training to maintain fairness yet leaned heavily on instinct and personal

interpretation. Even past state officers, who emphasized structure more, eventually shifted toward describing the subjective nature of evaluating candidates. In practice, although objectivity was emphasized, subjectivity was referenced more often and viewed as more influential in making final selections.

Nominating Committees' Skepticism towards Selection Process

Although nominating committees were generally satisfied with the elected state officers, many expressed skepticism about the selection process itself. Julio, a 2019 past state officer, admitted, "I was not convinced the nominating committee process was very good." Bart, a 2018 past state officer, shared similar mixed feelings: "There are things about it [the selection process] that I'm not super fond of, but at the same time, it's proven to be an effective process. I don't know if I would change anything about it." While committee members were enthusiastic about their chosen candidates, they also believed aspects of the process could be improved. The greatest concerns centered around the idea of interviewing as a performance and how emotions could influence how candidates presented themselves.

Interviewing as a Performance

Aligned with the Interviewee Framework (Huffcutt et al., 2011), nominating committee members viewed interviews as a performance that might not fully reflect a candidate's authenticity. Boston, a 2017 student member, explained, "This is where [during interviews] we're seeing their best as a person. Some of them could be really good at putting on a show for us in that moment." Committees expressed concern that candidates were on their "best behavior" and might tailor responses to meet expectations rather than reveal their true selves.

To increase authenticity, some members suggested more informal or unscripted observations. Catheryn, a 2017 student member, joked, "Planting a little camera in there [the holding room] because I think that shows those people that really are outgoing, hiding in the corner, or being fake. I think it shows their larger colors that we never get to see." While impractical, the suggestion highlighted concerns about candidates misrepresenting themselves. Despite limitations, behavioral interview questions were seen as the least biased way to assess candidates. John, a 2017 past state officer, shared, "There's no perfect formula for that, but between looking at the application, talking to their past teachers, and some of those behavioral interviewing questions, it's our best try."

However, teamwork was noted as difficult to evaluate through interviews alone. Many committee members suggested observing candidates interact directly. Antonia, the 2019 nominating committee chair, stated, "You have to base it [teamwork] on the facilitation round and their interactions with nominating committee members. But how do they work with people that could potentially be their teammates? I think that would be really interesting to see." Observing group dynamics was seen as a more effective way to assess teamwork than relying solely on self-reporting.

Emotions Impact Perception of Traits

Beyond viewing interviews as a performance, nominating committees were also concerned that emotions might misrepresent candidates. According to the Interviewee Framework (Huffcutt et al., 2011), emotions such as anxiety and confidence affect performance and are considered part of the Interviewee State Influences. Nervousness was the most frequently observed emotion. While a certain level of nervousness signaled passion for the role, excessive anxiety was seen as a barrier. Savannah, a 2018 student member, explained, "People [candidates] who were way, way too anxious about the whole process...You don't want to knock them for that, but at the same time we had candidates who couldn't even talk to us at some point." Nominating committees expressed discomfort with penalizing candidates for nerves but found it difficult to assess their traits when nerves hindered communication.

On the other hand, too little nervousness was often interpreted as arrogance. This was particularly noted among candidates who had served on nominating committees or who were highly prepared. Sandy stated:

I believe for a few of the candidates who had served on nom com the previous year, that was arguably the reason why they were not selected, because they made it so apparent that they had been in our shoes before, and they knew what we were supposed to be looking for.

Even when candidates were polished and well prepared, referring to their readiness could be interpreted as arrogance rather than experience. As a result, some level of nervousness was preferred over none at all.

Overall, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis revealed the traits nominating committees prioritized, how they identified those traits, and challenges within the selection process. The six traits provided structure and a sense of objectivity, but committees also relied on personal judgment. They especially valued selflessness, people skills, growth mindset, and commitment, and believed the candidates they selected reflected those traits. Still, concerns about the limitations of the interview process remained. Nominating committees noted how various factors influenced candidate performance and suggested improvements, such as incorporating more opportunities to observe teamwork.

Discussion

Nominating committees discussed the traits they looked for in candidates, how those traits were identified, and concerns with the current Western State FFA selection process. Members frequently referenced their personal leadership experiences, particularly past state officers. As all committee members were previously involved in FFA, their perceptions of leadership were shaped by the organization's values and teachings. According to Huffcutt et al. (2011), the Interviewee Framework recognizes how interviewers' demographics and characteristics can influence candidate evaluations. The interviewer's ability to assess qualifications is inherently limited by their own experiences and the imperfect medium of interview communication. While committees attempted to focus on the six traits, minimize external influence, and ensure fairness, complete objectivity remained out of reach because the interview process is ultimately shaped by the subjectivity of both parties. Thus, committee members' shared FFA backgrounds may result in the selection of officers deeply embedded in the organization's traditions, potentially limiting innovation. Yukl (2010) emphasizes that instigating change is a key leadership responsibility, suggesting Western State FFA should consider diversifying committee member backgrounds to encourage broader perspectives and reach a wider member base.

The traits emphasized by nominating committees, including selflessness, growth mindset, people skills, and commitment, align closely with the Youth Leadership Framework's cognitive, motivational, affective, and behavioral domains, all rooted in the ethical domain (Sherif, 2019). Given ethics' central role in effective leadership (Northouse, 2012), these traits should be prioritized in future nominating committee training and officer evaluations. While the current six traits outlined by Western State FFA include character, ambition, teamwork/interaction, problem-solving, communication, and responsibility, ethics is not integrated across all six. For example, problem-solving lacks an explicit ethical dimension. Integrating ethics into all six traits, or embedding character throughout the other five, could strengthen trait clarity. Since the four emergent traits were consistent across three committees and connect to Sherif's (2019) framework, they could enhance or replace the existing list. Additionally, there is no standardized definition of the six traits, leading to subjective interpretation among committee members, even those attempting to remain objective. While past officers, advisors, and committee chairs used the six traits as a guide, variability remained. To enhance consistency and reduce ambiguity, Western State FFA should provide clear definitions, examples, and application strategies for the six traits prior to selection. The Interviewee Framework identifies Interview Design Considerations as a key influence on interviewer evaluations

(Huffcutt et al., 2011). While changing interviewers' biases or experiences is difficult, improving the interview structure is manageable and could promote consistent candidate evaluations.

Supplemental Preparation, another component of the Interviewee Framework, includes the interview training of both interviewers and candidates (Huffcutt et al., 2011). If definitions of traits are provided to nominating committees, they should also be available to candidates prior to interviews. While trait clarity may enhance interview performance, it also supports candidates with a growth mindset in striving toward high-quality leadership. Authentic Leadership encourages leaders to understand who they are and pursue growth (Kiersch & Peters, 2017), aligning with the growth mindset trait. When candidates have access to clear expectations, they are better positioned to grow into the leaders desired by the committee.

The National FFA mission emphasizes personal growth (National FFA, 2025), and committees valued candidates who were genuine about their current development and committed to improvement. Kiersch and Peters (2017) advocate combining Authentic and Servant Leadership frameworks through experiential learning. Committee members viewed intrinsic development as equally important to extrinsic service, supporting this framework blend. Literature reinforces that self-regulation and other intrinsic qualities correlate with positive youth development (Lerner & Lerner, 2013). Future committees should consider integrating Kiersch and Peters' (2017) frameworks into their selection process.

Finally, committee members described a complex interplay between objectivity and subjectivity in leader selection. While objective frameworks help guide decisions, subjective evaluation was seen as essential to recognizing candidate fit. Leader-Member Exchange theory emphasizes the importance of leader-follower relationships (Northouse, 2012), and committee members, representing FFA's student-led nature, believed the student perspective should take precedence. Flexibility in interpreting traits allowed committees to select candidates they felt were best suited for state office, reinforcing the value of balanced judgment in leadership selection.

Recommendations for Practice and Research

Western State FFA nominating committees should consider an additional interview round focused on team interactions. Committees in this study viewed interviews as performances and valued candidate interactions more than interview responses. However, they felt the current process did not adequately evaluate teamwork. While committee chairs observed some interactions in holding rooms, most members did not witness team dynamics. Since teamwork/interaction is one of the six official traits (Western State FFA, 2020), this could be better addressed. The optional seventh round, "committee's choice," could be used as a group activity to assess teamwork more effectively.

Committees also recommended providing candidates with constructive feedback. They valued a growth mindset in candidates, emphasizing authenticity, reflection, and professionalism. Feedback, even limited, would align with FFA's mission to promote leadership, growth, and career success (National FFA, 2025), and support continued development regardless of selection outcome.

Further research should examine how nominating committee members are selected. This study showed that committee culture and past experiences influence perceptions of leadership. According to the Interviewee Framework (Huffcutt et al., 2011), interviewer experiences affect interview outcomes. Investigating the committee selection process would provide insight into who is selecting state officers and how. A longitudinal study, with an investigator observing planning, training, and interviews in real time, could offer valuable context. Additionally, comparing nominating committee practices across states may help identify best practices to improve selection processes across FFA and other student leadership organizations.

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