

2017

Strength in diversity and diversity of strengths of  
state FFA officers: An analysis of Clifton  
StrengthsFinder assessment data for state FFA  
officers, 2006-2010; 2012-2015

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**Strength in diversity and diversity of strengths of state FFA officers**  
**an analysis of Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment data for state FFA officers,**  
**2006-2010; 2012-2015**

by

**Denise Mae Mills**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Major: Agricultural Education

Program of Study Committee:  
Ryan G. Anderson, Co-Major Professor  
Thomas H. Paulsen, Co-Major Professor  
Robert A. Martin

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2017

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DEDICATION

I am immensely grateful for my family and friends' support through this process. I undoubtedly would not have been able to complete this without them. Most notably of that group is my husband, who never lost steadfast belief in my ability to complete this research.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee co-chairs, Dr. Ryan Anderson and Dr. Thomas Paulsen, and my other committee member, Dr. Robert Martin, for their guidance, support, patience, and perseverance throughout the course of this research project.

Of course, many thanks are due to my family and friends. Without their continual support, this research would not have come to fruition. My husband, Ryan, served as my rock throughout this adventure of graduate school, always providing an anchor back to the value of this opportunity and my value in this research. To my loves; Burke, Grace and Olivia, serving as both an inspiration and good distraction, you were all essential in this process. My true desire for all of you is to discover that sometimes the most difficult limitations you may ever encounter are the ones you place on yourself. Believing in yourself holds enormous importance--never overlook that.

I would like to thank the National FFA Organization for their cooperation on this research. As we hear so many say, the FFA is one component of my life that truly helped shape the person I am today. Specifically, I would like to thank Mr. Shane Jacques, Education Specialist at the National FFA Organization, for his time, patience and collegiality throughout this research. His unwavering belief and commitment to the state FFA officer program has been essential in its progression and continued success. I have complete respect for you as a colleague and feel it is an honor to call you a friend, “thank you” just doesn’t feel like enough.

Lastly, to the students that serve as state FFA officers, the students that aspire to become state FFA officers, and the students impacted positively by student leaders, thank

you. Thank you for continuing to fuel my faith in the future of agriculture and our world.

Your talents and strengths will shape so much of our future, embrace who you are and how important you are to that future of our world.



## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify and analyze self-identified talents among state FFA officers, which spanned nearly a decade of student leader data collected by the National FFA Organization. As outlined in the Agricultural Education Research Agenda (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016), the need to investigate soft skill development and preparedness, as well as, agricultural recruitment and retention is necessary, and information about the strengths of student leaders may provide some insight into this priority. The first objective was to examine diversity in the top five talents of state FFA officers as identified by the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment. The second objective compared the top five talent themes of state FFA officers to the state selection process utilized to elect said officers. Objective three was to analyze state FFA officers' talents according to the strengths-based domains of leadership utilizing the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment data. The research design used a convenience sample of state FFA officers who participated in the personal development opportunity to utilize the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment tool, who, by a combination of the state association and the student leader, choose to participate. The strengths' data was analyzed for frequency and percentages using JMP software and organized using Microsoft<sup>®</sup> Excel.

All state FFA associations are provided, free of charge, the opportunity for state FFA officers to utilize the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment. Once a student completes the assessment, the signature, top five themes of talent are recorded and made available to the National FFA Organization. Separately collected by the National FFA Organization was the state demographic information. If provided by participating officers or state association, this

state demographic was connected with the strengths' assessment student data. Achiever, Responsibility, Restorative, Includer, Belief, Positivity, WOO (Winning Others Over) and Learner are of the most consistently shared talents in the top ten each year among state FFA officers from 2006-2010, 2012-2015. Using the data of the students and respective themes from 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015, which corresponds to the state demographic recorded, frequency and percent of talents were measured compared to the selection process(es) utilized in the corresponding state. The following components of selection: a state FFA officer application, interview, slate of officers, immediate vote of state officer slate, popular vote by individual officer, and on-convention stage rounds and/or speeches were compared to the student data. The same top ten most frequently occurring talents, regardless of which selection process(es) were utilized of those noted above, were measured. Those talents were Achiever, Responsibility, Restorative, Includer, Learner, Belief, Positivity, WOO, Input and Communication. Throughout the entire data collection period, when the 3,283 state FFA officers' top five themes of talent were grouped and organized into the four leadership domains, identified in strengths-based leadership, the results show the most frequently occurring talents were in the Executing domain at 32.87%, while the Influencing domain ranked the lowest represented in the sample at 17.88%

The State and National FFA Organizations should consider these findings with regard to all leadership development programming. Are students receiving adequate information, opportunities and resources to identify, nurture and grow their talents? Evaluating and realizing the talents of students and how the respective domains of each are categorized may prove insightful when creating leadership development curriculum and content revisions to student programs. Future research should evaluate a random sample of agricultural education

students not in FFA and this research may provide foundations for a greater understanding of whether or not programs and opportunities are nurturing and attracting a talent-diverse array of students into the organization. State and National FFA staff should consider and review each step in the selection process, and whether these steps are truly effective at allowing diversely talented members to be authentically represented. Providing adequate opportunities for students to invest learning knowledge, and to develop influencing skills, could potentially pull the natural talents contained within the Influencing domain more readily into practice.

## CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

Well known, the foundation of the National FFA Organization is reflected in the mission, “FFA makes a positive difference in the lives of students by developing their potential for premier leadership, personal growth and career success through agricultural education” (National FFA Organization, 2016a, p. 7). These components come to life in numerous programs and opportunities throughout the National FFA Organization. Nurturing and growing leadership skills are essential for students who are developing professionals and majoring in the field of agricultural and life sciences (Strong, Wynn, Irby, & Lindner, 2013). The depth and strength of agricultural professions, in all facets of agriculture, rely on self-aware and purpose-driven individuals armed with accurate confidence in personal competencies. Providing empowerment and preparation in this self-awareness and understanding others paves way for them to be agents of social change (Wisner, 2011). The rapid pace of today’s societal change makes learning part of almost every environment and effectively connecting with people in those environments can be pivotal in success (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006).

### Background and Setting

Finding out what gives meaning to others’ efforts proves to be an element of envisioning the future (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Recently, Velez, McKim, Moore, and Stephens (2015) identified that “...agricultural leadership education opportunities are prevalent and growing across the nation” (p. 124). As outlined by Roberts, Harder, and Brashears (2016-2020) Agricultural Education Research Agenda, “...make *Priority 3: Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce that Addresses the Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* a problem of focus in every sector of the agricultural industry and for all aspects of agricultural education (formal,

nonformal, K-12, postsecondary, youth, adult, agricultural literacy, marketing, media campaigns, etc.)” (p. 30).

The existing body of research in agricultural education leadership settings is growing and analyzing state FFA officer data, which could provide foundational information in student leadership insight. The strengths revolution encourages organizations to become great by doing more than just accommodate the fact that each person is different, but to utilize these differences and build the organization around them (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Analysis of state FFA officers’ talents can provide insight into the true diversity of talents among student members, providing a foundation around which to continue to build the organization.

Exploration of leadership development from a strengths perspective serves as an alternative path to evaluate leadership development practices. The Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> is a web-based assessment that measures the presence of 34 talents organized into themes (Clifton, et al., 2006). (See Appendix A for a complete list and brief description of the 34 themes of talent.) Research has been conducted regarding the utilization of the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment and the strengths-based approach in a number of educational settings, both in secondary and post-secondary settings (Louis, 2012). Gillum (2005) studied underperforming high school students in mathematics who received guidance on how to utilize their strengths, which indicated increased efforts in mathematics. Purnell School, an all-girls boarding and day school in New Jersey, utilize strengths-based education as the foundation for individualized learning (Purnell School, 2017). The Mother Teresa Middle School, a Jesuit Academy in Saskatchewan, Canada, also utilizes a strengths-based educational approach in a faith-based curriculum (Mother Teresa Middle School, 2017).

While documented secondary applications of strengths-based programs are still growing, post-secondary applications are booming. As identified on the Gallup StrengthsQuest® website (2017), the University of Southern Maine, University of Michigan Ross School of Business, University of Missouri, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, University of Iowa, University of Colorado, Kansas State University, University of Chicago, George Mason University, Kalamazoo Valley Community College, Towson University, West Texas A&M, George Washington University School of Business, and Weber State University are all currently utilizing the strengths program. Over the last several years, nearly 500 colleges and universities have explored the application of strengths (Bowers & Lopez, 2010). The University of Missouri has between 4,500 and 5,000 students, faculty and staff each year using the StrengthsQuest® program and the university has been using the program for 10 years (McCarville, 2016a). Students who reported having a strong understanding of their own strengths at Michigan Ross School of Business were more engaged with school and more hopeful for the future (Gallup, 2016). The University of Southern Maine initially sought the Clifton StrengthsFinder® program to aid efforts to increase first-year students' retention, and while they measure success in multiple ways, a slight increase in retention has been noted (McCarville, 2016b). In a study at a faith-based liberal arts college, evidence to support the use of the Clifton StrengthsFinder® instrument in advisory situations significantly influenced persistence of first-year, first time students (Swanson, 2006).

Students reported, in a study by Bowers and Lopez (2010), they felt reinforced by their strengths and more frequently used them with confidence, which they all noted as beneficial. Pritchard (2009) conducted a study with students at the University of Wales who participated in a strengths-based educational intervention, which included the Clifton StrengthsFinder® instrument. This research included the students' description of the impact of the intervention.

“...this included a) cognitive reframing, b) improved positive self-concept and self-awareness, c) increased confidence, d) individual learning epiphanies, e) tolerance of others and f) increased self-efficacy” (Pritchard, 2009, p. 186).

Successful teams that work well together possess broader grouping of strengths. From Gallup research, four distinct domains of leadership strengths emerged; Executing, Influencing, Relationship Building, and Strategic Thinking (Rath & Conchie, 2008). (See Appendix B, Figure B1, for talent themes broken down into the four leadership domains). Instead of relying on strengths from one or two talented team members, the concept of the leadership domains emphasizes the benefit of having team members with talents across all four domains. The leadership impact of the officer team is impacted when advisors help students realize the importance of being an authentic team member, willing to work and lead along with the team (Woodard & Herren, 1991). Expressly emphasized is the importance of realizing that while it may not be ideal to have individuals well-rounded, through the concepts of strengths-based leadership, teams should be well-rounded (Rath & Conchie, 2008).

### **Statement of the Problem**

As outlined in the Agricultural Education Research Agenda (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016), the need to investigate soft skill development and preparedness, as well as agricultural recruitment and retention, is necessary, and information about the strengths of student leaders may provide some insight into this priority. State FFA officers vary in age from high school students to college students. State FFA officers have the opportunity to complete a rigorous training and curriculum program provided by the National FFA Organization. Additional state training is also provided and varies in rigor, resources, and quantity from state to state. Some states actively utilize strengths throughout the officer’s term, while others do not

utilize the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> program. The data from the state officers who have taken the assessment provided by the National FFA Organization has been collected since 2006 (excluding 2011 – no data was collected); yet the data has not been analyzed in order to propel student development forward.

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this thesis study was to identify and analyze self-identified talents among state FFA officers spanning nearly a decade of student leaders using data collected from the National FFA Organization through the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment. This was accomplished through three specific objectives.

1. Analyze diversity of the top five talents of state FFA officers, as identified by the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment.
2. Compare the top five talent themes of state FFA officers, as identified by the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment, to the state selection process utilized to elect said officers.
3. Analyze state FFA officers' talents according to the strength-based domains of leadership utilizing the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment.

### **Significance of the Study**

Students today want to pursue careers that will be personally and professionally rewarding and aligned with their values and interests, which are undergoing a state of change (National Research Council, 2009). The Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> instrument has widely become utilized as a tool in leadership and student development. A better understanding of the diversity of students in our classrooms may provide more understanding of effective educational practices, which could lead to improved learning environments (Woolfolk, 2010). Secondary, post-



secondary and leadership strengths-based development have been examined through a number of research studies (Bayer, 2012; Bowers & Lopez, 2010; Caldwell, 2009; Carson, Evans, Gitin, & Eads, 2011; Gillum, 2005; Lane & Chapman, 2011; Lehnert, 2009; Louis, 2012; Pritchard, 2009; Stebleton, Soria, & Albecker, 2012; Swanson, 2006; Wisner, 2011). Finding out what gives meaning to others' efforts proves to be an element of envisioning the future (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). The National Research Council (2009) outlines the importance of transferable, often called soft skills, beyond the classroom into the workplace. Student diversity, motivations and self-awareness all support the key concept of not only strength's awareness and utilization of self-identified strengths, but also teammates' strengths and sound leader selection processes.

### **Definitions of Selected Terms**

Definitions of key terms used in this study are listed as follows:

1. Authentic Leadership - "...is a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self development." (Walumba, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008, p.94).
2. Blast Off - is typically the first in a continuum of training conferences for state FFA officers. "The conference helps newly elected state officers identify their strengths, develop personal growth plans, master speech writing and delivery, and develop personal management skills" (National FFA Organization, 2016b, para. 1).
3. Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> - "Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> is a 30-minute, Web-based assessment that measures the presence of talent in 34 areas called 'themes' "(Clifton, et al., 2006, p. xviii).

4. Positive psychology – “Positive psychology is an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions” (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005).
5. Strength - “A strength is the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity” (Clifton, et al., 2006, p. 4).
6. Talent - “A talent is a naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling or behavior that can be productively applied” (Clifton, et al., 2006, p.2).
7. Theme - “A group of similar talents” (Clifton, et al., 2006, p. 3).

### **Thesis Organization**

This thesis is organized into six chapters including the introduction, literature review, methods, two research manuscripts which examine the objectives in greater detail, followed by general conclusions, implications and recommendations. The introduction provides insight into the background, setting, problem statement, purpose, objectives, and significance of the study, as well as, selected term definitions. Chapter two provides a literature review of related research along with the conceptual framework. Chapter three highlights the methods of the study, information about the population, data collection, data analysis, limitations of the study, and instrument selection. Chapter four includes a research manuscript that examines objective one, analysis and discussion of the state FFA officer Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> data. Chapter five includes a research manuscript that examines objectives two and three. This includes state FFA officer selection process data and the strengths-based leadership domains of the state FFA officer Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> data. Chapter six thoroughly highlights the major findings, general conclusions, implications, and recommendations of the findings. Each section includes individual references. Appendices are located at the end of the document and contain the Clifton

StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> talent descriptions (Figure A1) and the strengths-based leadership domains (Figure B1). The memorandum of understanding between the National FFA Organization and Iowa State University is Appendix C. The request for state staff contact information for the purpose of educational research from the National FFA Organization is Appendix D. A sample email communication to state FFA staff is Appendix E. An overview of the state selection process information collected is Appendix F.

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## CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review begins with a brief review of the history of leadership and leadership in FFA to provide a foundational base of information. There is some limited research regarding state FFA officers and selection processes, which will also be included in this section. Strengths research has spanned a diverse cross-section of situations both in the secondary classroom and post-secondary academia, throughout professional and career scenarios as well as organizations and non-profits. This literature review provides a sampling of research analyzing strengths-based practices, which transcend the direct situation and find associated relevance to this study, as well as, a brief background on positive psychology, the concept behind the strengths philosophy. In conclusion is a review of literature associated with the conceptual frameworks of this study, authentic leadership and strengths-based leadership.

The purpose of this thesis, which has guided this literature review, was to identify and analyze self-identified talents among state FFA officers spanning nearly a decade of student leaders with data collected from the National FFA Organization through the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment. This was accomplished through three specific objectives.

1. Analyze diversity of the top five talents of state FFA officers, as talent is identified by the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment.
2. Compare the top five talent themes of state FFA officers, as talent is identified by the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment, to the state selection process utilized to elect said officers.

3. Analyze state FFA officers talents, as talent is identified by the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment, according to the strengths-based domains of leadership.

## **Leadership**

Retracing the journey of the discipline of leadership is an adventure; throughout the course of its' history, leadership has encountered various definitions and perspectives. It began with the first 'modern' writer on leadership, Thomas Carlyle, who identified a model of heroism that grew into a popular assumption about leadership (Bryman, 2011). Leadership traits were explored in the 1940s. Stogdill (1948) conducted a study about personal factors associated with leadership, and discussed that leadership is not possession of certain traits, but leadership "...appears rather to be a working relationship among members of a group, in which the leader acquires status through active participation..." (p. 66). In the late 1970s, Burns provided an extension of the idea about leaders and followers with shared goals in a mutual relationship (Northouse, 2015). The 1980s brought many perspectives and scholarly views on leadership. Northouse (2015) in *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, outlined these perspectives into four buckets: Do as the leader wishes (leadership predominately defined as getting followers to do what the leader wants); influence (frequently used to describe leadership as influence); traits (many people understand leadership is based on traits of the leader); and transformation (leadership as a process). Transformational leadership became a concept that incorporated a symbiotic relationship of followers and leaders, raising each others' motivation (Burns, 1978). Northouse (2015) further described how the debate has continued into the present, with dissention regarding management versus leadership and dissention over the general process of leadership. He discussed four emerging leadership



approaches: authentic leadership, spiritual leadership, servant leadership, and adaptive leadership (2015). Authentic leadership reflected the focus of the authenticity of leaders. Spiritual leadership focused on motivating followers to use their values and sense of calling (Northouse, 2015). The concept of servant leadership involved a model based on teamwork, ethical and caring behavior, and enhancing personal growth of members/employees, while improving the quality of the organization (Greenleaf, 1998). Adaptive leadership focused on how leaders encourage followers to solve problems and confront challenges (Northouse, 2015).

There are numerous leadership journals and scholarly publications that can be identified, which are dedicated to leadership and practice. Some of those top-tier publishing outlets include, *The Leadership Quarterly*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *American Psychologist*, *Journal of Management*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *Organizational Science*, and *Personnel Psychology* (Dinh, Lord, Gardner, Meuser, Liden & Hu, 2014). Moving into the new millennia, Dinh, et al. (2014) provided a review of these publications for an overview of recent leadership research along with discussion and recommendations, notably recognizing that no unified theory of leadership currently exists.

### **Leadership in FFA**

Research with a historical approach to leadership development is also noted through the review and it documents historical development of leadership events and activities in both the FFA and 4-H programs (Hoover, Scholl, Dunigan, & Momontora, 2007). Considerations of the contributions of The FFA Creed to leadership development within the

FFA has been weighed and measured through a historical study by Connors and Velez (2008). Recounting the history and use of FFA camps for leadership development was the focus of Connors, Falk, & Epps (2010) who discovered at least 24 states that had offered some form of camp experience.

Horstmeier and Nall (2007) explored youth leadership development from a national perspective on FFA member role and activity context in 2007. Recommendations from the study highlight a perpetuation of members experiencing a continuum of leadership development activities which should include an emphasis on assisting youth to gain skills that help them better understand self and interaction with others (Horstmeier & Nall, 2007). While each agricultural education program and community is unique, an interesting perspective was gleaned from this research. The study goes on to bring attention to the potential need for even more opportunities of community and group development experiences (Horstmeier & Nall, 2007). Personal leadership development opportunities are adequate, but there is a need for more opportunities to plug those into the bigger picture of community and group environments.

Several aspects of leadership camp experiences were explored through research. Group leader learning style was measured along with level of student knowledge gain and whether that was impacted by the group leader learning style (Brown & Terry, 2013). Brown and Terry (2013) concluded that the small group leaders held an extraverted learning style and that student learning measured after group sessions was statistically significant. The research failed to reject the null hypothesis of no association between camper learning and group leader learning style. Brown, Terry, and Kelsey (2013) examined the impact of learning styles on learning outcomes of 1,500 FFA members participating in an Oklahoma

FFA Alumni Leadership Camp. Learning style indicated no impact on the amount of information learned by students during small group sessions in this study (Brown, Terry, & Kelsey, 2013). Levels of cognitive gain by campers were examined along with the amount of retained information by Brown, Terry and Kelsey (2014), results indicated that a six-month follow-up post-test was negligible.

Mullins and Weeks (2006) explored behaviors exhibited by FFA chapter presidents through a self-perception lens, as well as, compared to their officers' observations of leadership behaviors. Results indicated that enabling others to act, modeling the way and encouraging the heart were most commonly exhibited; however, chapter presidents tended to hold an inflated self-view of these behaviors (Mullins & Weeks, 2006). A consistent, positive change, over a three-year period, in the leadership development of Washington Leadership Conference attendees was noted in a study by Stedman, Rutherford, Rosser, and Elbert (2009). Rosch, Simonsen, and Velez (2015) discovered relatively stable leadership construct scores through a year-long examination in regard to their leadership skills, confidence in leading, and motivation to engage in leadership behaviors in the FFA. Dormody and SeEVERS (1994) sought to determine predictors of youth leadership life skills development and posited no relation to self-esteem, years in FFA, age, ethnicity, or place of residence. Self-perceived youth leadership and life skills of Iowa FFA members were examined for a relationship with development scores and participation in youth leadership activities, and found existence of a positive relationship (Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997).

In a study which included both the 4-H and FFA organizations, McElravy, and Hastings (2014) explored profiling the youth leader through the relationship between the Big-Five model of personality and emotional intelligence and self-perceived leadership skills.

Among the youth leaders in this data sample, trait-based emotional intelligence was measured as the strongest predictor of self-perceived leadership skills (McElravy & Hastings, 2014). Park and Dyer (2005) examined potential relationships between involvement in FFA and 4-H and increased undergraduate student leadership involvement at a land-grant college of agriculture. This study identified recruitment of new students to the college of agriculture and leadership in campus organizations as a contributions made by former 4-H and FFA members in undergraduate student leadership involvement (Park & Dyer, 2005).

Contributions to the development of state FFA officers were considered in a study completed by Hoover & Bruce (2006) where they took a deeper look at the long-term consequences associated with serving as a state FFA officer in Pennsylvania. Hoover and Bruce (2006) posited that holding a state level FFA office engages youth in self-exploration, discovery of strengths and weaknesses, in addition to, providing an avenue to receive recognition for competence. Furthermore, results indicated support of positive adolescent development, transference of leadership skills, and purposeful civic and community engagement (Hoover & Bruce, 2006). Considerations to future leader development was the scope of examining National FFA officer candidate preparation, where several factors were identified as important and could result in an individual's enhancement of preparation (Hoover & Atwater, 2005).

### **Clifton StrengthsFinder®**

The Clifton StrengthsFinder® is a web-based assessment that measures the presence of 34 talents organized into themes (Clifton, et al., 2006). A theme is a category of talents, which are defined as recurring and consistent patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). The intentional purpose of the assessment is to nurture

personal growth through discussion with others and as a tool for self-awareness (Asplund, Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2009). The Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment is based on positive psychology and while its main application has been in the domain of work it has been used in understanding individuals in a variety of situations including student, team and personal development (Asplund, et al., 2009). StrengthsFinder® data has shown benefits to teachers in effective teaching and responding to youth (Educational Horizons, 2006). Research has revealed the idea of three possible stages of strengths development: talent identification, integration and acceptance of one's talents followed with changed behaviors (Hodges & Harter, 2005). According to Lopez's cover letter in (Louis, 2012), knowing one's strengths alone isn't enough, "strengths grow in the context of relationships, teams, and organizations," (p. 2).

Interviews administered by Gallup analysts to more than two-million individuals were reviewed and generated into data that was used to capitalize on the accumulated knowledge and experience of strengths-based practice (Asplund, et al., 2009). This research was grouped, tested and finally funneled down to 180 item pairs, written at a 10<sup>th</sup> grade reading level (Clifton, et al., 2006). Currently, the assessment is available in over 20 different languages, and after a revision in 2006, these 180 items were reduced to 177 and were grouped into 34 themes, listed in Appendix A, Figure A1 (Clifton, et al., 2006).

According to the research, analyzing through strengths-colored glasses has shown that one can view their self, their future, and others all differently (Clifton, et al, 2006). In a study by Lehnert (2009), results indicated that participants that engaged in the strengths training thus reported greater gains on the five dimensions of Kouzes & Posner's (2007) Leadership Challenge Model. These ideas all support the key role of not only strength's

awareness and utilization of self- identified strengths, but also those of teammates' strengths. As research has indicted, more effective group performance, accompanied by higher quality end products, can be a result of operating from a strengths perspective (Clifton, et al., 2006).

In 2005, Gillum researched the effects of strengths instruction on under-performing high school students strictly in mathematics, and found an indication that the most positive results occurred in groups that did receive specific instruction on strengths' utilization. An increased quality of effort in the math classroom was noted along with an increased desire to apply strengths in and out of the classroom (Gillum, 2005). Although there were a number of extraneous variables not accounted for, the indication of a positive relationship between strengths awareness and instruction on outcome did exist.

In 2009, Lehnert studied the influence of strengths-based development on leadership practices among undergraduate college students, and found that students who engaged in a strengths regimen reported significantly greater gains on all five dimensions measured by the Student Leadership Practices Inventory (SLPI) developed by Kouzes and Posner (Lehnert, 2009).

Programs such as Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> allows students to better comprehend, accept, develop and apply their strengths using the resources and activities provided from utilizing the assessment (Lane & Chapman, 2011). Findings from this study indicated that positive student development garnered from a strengths-program like Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> may lead to higher developed leadership capacity in a variety of settings, because it may lead to a greater belief in oneself and applying individual talents.

Wisner (2011) examined psychological strengths as predictors of effective student leadership which contained several elements, including one aspect using the

StrengthsFinder® assessment. Wisner's (2011) findings indicated that increasing levels of self-efficacy and optimism may lead to improved effectiveness as leaders (Wisner, 2011). Strengths-based training and self-assessment is potentially one avenue to raise this needed increase in self-efficacy. Although there were some notable limitations to the study, including the nature of the correlational design and further research needed to fully understand the topic, appearances indicate that effective leadership behaviors in college students may be positively impacted through the development of psychological strengths (Wisner, 2011).

Carson, Evans, Gitin, and Eads (2011) mapped StrengthsQuest themes to Holland's Vocational Personality Types and established a reasonable conclusion that there exists a relationship with the Kuder Career System, which are considered indicators of vocational personality type. Additionally, Caldwell (2009) sought to identify a relationship between Kolb's learning styles and Clifton StrengthsFinder's® talent themes in her dissertation, which demonstrated there is evidence to suggest it does exist.

Integrating strengths-based education information in a first-year experience curriculum was the focus of a study by Stebleton, Soria and Albecker (2012). The results of this research suggested that students experienced increased confidence in identifying their personal strengths, accurately assessing their abilities and values in a major or career choice, strengths application in effective learning, and strengths utilization of realistic expectations of the future (Stebleton, et al., 2012). Furthermore, the authors go on to discuss the potential impact this strength-based curriculum ultimately has on students:

...that a curriculum based on strengths positively impacts students' awareness of their strengths, a factor that, in turn, has positive implications for students' majors, career

choices, and future expectations. Students who have greater self-awareness of their strengths may be better positioned to make decisions related to their academic field of study or future career, especially in regards to their career-orientated values. Knowing their strengths, students also benefit by becoming more realistic about their future expectations and are more likely to accurately assess their own abilities within academic and career contexts (p. 5-6).

Additionally, in a study by Bayer (2012) on the effectiveness of student leadership development programs at a midwestern university, students credited knowing their strengths as one of the components of their program that had the greatest impact on their overall leadership development. This perceived importance was rated higher than other program components such as collaborating with peers, service, faculty coaching, a retreat, leadership goal setting, and opportunities to reflect (Bayer, 2012).

### **Positive Psychology**

Positive psychology would be described as the science of optimal human function; ultimately studying people at their best and understanding that so it can be built upon (Linley, Govindji, & West, 2007). A positive psychological approach on analyzing what can be garnered from looking at the strengths of state FFA officers through the years of data collected from the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment is an example of positive psychology at work. This is contrary to the general focus of psychology, which examined the negative side of people and things that are wrong or weak in life. In 2000, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi wrote in the *American Psychologist*,

The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and



optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present). At the individual level, it is about positive personal traits; the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future-mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship; responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic (p. 5).

The Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment was built on these concepts of positive psychology, helping individuals identify natural positive talents (Hodges & Harter, 2005). Considerations into the practice of positive psychology has identified two potential side effects; one of better physical health, given the potential impact of mental well-being on the body, and helping people become mentally stronger, more productive and making high human potential actual (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

In the past five years in *The Journal of Agricultural Education*, a few studies have considered deterrents, barriers or lack of participation, retention and why students or teachers leave the FFA or agricultural education community (Phelps, Henry, & Bird, 2012; Tippens, Rickets, Morgan, Navarro, & Flanders, 2013; Martin & Kitchel, 2014). However, a similar scan of the past five years in *The Journal of Agricultural Education*, would highlight a large quantity in positive contributions analysis on similar subjects (Roberts, Terry, Brown, & Ramsey, 2016; Rose Stephens, Stripling, Cross, Sanok, & Brawner, 2016; Clark, Kelsey, & Brown, 2014; Crutchfield, Ritz, & Burris, 2013; Bird, Martin, & Simonsen, 2013; Lawver & Torres, 2012; Maxwell, Vincent, & Ball, 2011; Birkenholz & Simonsen, 2011). Comparatively, reflecting twenty years past into *The Journal of Agricultural Education*,

notes a relatively balanced focus of analysis on both positive (Hoover & Scanlon, 1991a; Wardlow & Joerger, 1996; Cheek, Arrington, Carter, & Randell, 1994; Johnson, 1993; Cano & Miller, 1992; Brown, 1992) and negative (Rousan & Henderson, 1996; Bell & Fritz; 1994; Fletcher & Deeds, 1994; Muller & Miller, 1993; Bell & Fritz, 1992; Hoover & Scanlon, 1991b) perspectives throughout FFA and agricultural education. While all research in agricultural education is valued, this simply draws attention to an increasingly embraced positive psychology perspective.

Positive psychology applied in modern views of leadership are more positioned around the concept of authenticity, simply stating that the most effective leaders are being themselves and being true to themselves (Linley, et al., 2007). Supporters of researching positive psychology believe that a psychology of positive human functioning will emerge that can accomplish a scientific understanding and effective practices that build thriving individuals, families and communities (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

### **Authentic Leadership**

Authentic leadership is a relatively young, emerging concept generally described as encompassing authentic leaders and their practice of leadership (Northouse, 2015). Looking deeper into the history of authentic leadership, there are some impending views among scholars about the concept of authentic leadership. Luthans and Avolio (2003) outlined authentic leadership in the context of an organization as “a process that draws from both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which results in both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors on the part of leaders” (p. 243). Begley (2004) described authentic leadership as “a function of self-knowledge, sensitivity to the orientation of others, and a technical sophistication that leads to

a synergy of leadership action.” (p. 5) Each definition contains similar language and components, yet notably have some aspects of the nature of disagreement, the moral emphasis. Through the research agenda and Gallup Leadership Institute associates Avolio, Gardner, Luthans, May, Walumbwa, and colleagues worked on a more refined definition (Garner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011). “Authentic leadership is a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development” (Walumbwa, et al., p. 94). Throughout these variances in interpretation of authentic leadership, a leader’s self-awareness has been widely agreed upon as the beginning of authentic leadership development (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Algera and Lips-Wiersma (2012) sought to examine the recent surge in authentic leadership research, and the subsequent moral dilemmas. They also emphasize the importance of individual freedom and personal responsibility in being authentic, which requires a connection and responsibility of the organization collective. Research demonstrated by Diddams and Chang (2012) suggested, “authentic leadership holds great promise for producing effective leaders who are oriented toward the service of others” (p. 600). While future research into authentic leadership would be quite complex and challenging, authentic leadership is believed to retain the capability to break through some of the current crossroads of leadership theory (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012).

Wisner (2011) explored psychological strengths as predictors of effective student leadership using, in part, the concept of authentic leadership. Wisner (2011) outlined how authentic leadership development theory promotes the development of strengths and is rooted

in positive psychology. She goes on to discuss that even though further research is needed to fully understand the impact of strengths ownership on leadership effectiveness, indications exist that effective leadership behaviors in her college student sample may be increased through the development of psychological strengths (Wisner, 2011). Avolio and Gardner's (2005) key distinction of authentic leaders is "anchored by their own deep sense of self" (p. 329) and that "authentic leadership can help develop and shape a strength-based organization" (p. 334).

### **Strengths-Based Leadership**

If looking through the strengths' perspective, when approaching any situation, changes occur because of that perspective. Often people see themselves differently, their future differently and they see others differently (Clifton, et al., 2006). The process of building relationships and collaborating within those relationships can also take on a new perspective and outcomes. A study by Judge and Hurst (as cited by Rath & Conchie, 2008) suggested that "people who are aware of their strengths and build self-confidence at a young age may reap a 'cumulative advantage' that continues to grow over a lifetime" (p. 16). The authors further suggested "that people who had the opportunity to use their strengths early on (between the ages of 15-23) had significantly higher job satisfaction and income levels 26 years later" (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p. 16)

As strengths research progressed, the idea formed to consider how an individual's strengths impacted team dynamics and effectiveness, giving way to broader groupings of strengths. From this examination, "four distinct domains of leadership strength emerged: Executing, Influencing, Relationship Building, and Strategic Thinking" (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p. 23). (See Appendix B, Figure B1). The concepts behind the domains of leadership

strength embraced the fact that each person is unique to their talents, and when talents were combined with team members, if spread across the domains, this usually provided a more successful team experience.

“Leaders with dominant strength in the Executing domain know how to make things happen” (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p. 24). These types of people produce results, get things done and will work until the task or project is completed. “Those who lead by Influencing help their team reach a much broader audience” (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p. 25). These types of people will be successful in spreading the key messages and principles of the organization, both inside and out. “Those who lead through Relationship Building are the essential glue that holds a team together” (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p. 25). These types of people will bring teams and efforts together and will commonly produce a higher yield. “Leaders with great Strategic Thinking strengths are the ones who keep us all focused on what could be” (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p. 26). These types of people on a team push and stretch thinking often leading to better team decisions and outcomes.

In the business world, the strength-based concept can even filter into selection, performance management, and career development systems (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). There are key concepts within these that can transfer to other situations like the FFA; however, these don't precisely transfer to the state FFA officer realm. As the strengths philosophy provides for a new and different perspective in a variety of ways, one of those is on relationships. The quality of those relationships is directly related to the quality of your overall life (Clifton, et al., 2006). Strong teams have a several things in common, including; teams' focus on results, giving priority to what's best for the organization, committing to their work, embracing diversity, and attracting talent (Rath & Conchie, 2008). Strengths-

based leadership takes those relationships to the next level of productivity when applied to teams and organizations.

Research on strengths-based development has yielded four following concepts pivotal to successes on this approach: strengths development is naturally motivating and can provide energy; relationships are essential to the development of strengths; strengths development is not about ignoring weaknesses; and strengths development is tempered by the example of the coach, and their development (Welch, Grossaint, Reid, & Walker, 2014).

### **Summary**

Throughout the course of its history, leadership has encountered various definitions and perspectives leading to a number of theories, leadership inventories and research. The National FFA Organization has experienced a myriad of research and investigation into the impacts, results, functions, benefits and components of its members and programs. Some of this research has included state FFA officers; however, no current research exists that explores the strengths of state FFA officers. Programs such as Clifton StrengthsFinder® allows students to gain a greater belief and awareness of their strengths, which may lead to positive student development. Numerous studies have shown support of these benefits while discussing various uses of the assessment.

The underlying concept to the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment is rooted in positive psychology. Self-awareness is the cornerstone of authentic leadership, this is where strengths identification and development fit so well into the authentic leadership realm. Strength-based leadership takes relationships to the next level of productivity when applied to teams and organizations.

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## **CHAPTER III. METHODS**

The research methods described in this chapter explain the utilization of the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment, data collection and analysis for this research. Furthermore, they specifically outline how the assessment data was recorded and additional data was collected. Included are descriptions of the research objectives along with a description of the research design and data analysis methods. Also included is a broad overview of the research behind Clifton StrengthsFinder® validity, reliability, consistency, and utility.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The purpose of this descriptive study was to identify and explore self-identified talents among state FFA officers spanning nearly a decade of student leader data collected by the National FFA Organization. The first objective was to examine diversity of the top five talents of state FFA officers as identified by the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment. The second objective sought to compare trends of the top five talent themes of state FFA officers, as identified by the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment, to the state selection process utilized to elect said officers. Objective three was to analyze state FFA officers' talents according to the strength-based domains of leadership utilizing the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment data.

### **Population and Sample**

All states' FFA associations are provided, free of charge, the opportunity and information to distribute an access code to state FFA officers, in order to utilize the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment. Once a student completes the assessment, the signature top five themes of talent are recorded and available to the National FFA Organization. If provided by participating officers or state association, the state demographic was recorded and associated

with the student assessment data. While not all respondent data includes the state association, if present, this information, which correlates to the state selection process, was also included in the analysis.

The research design used a convenience sample of participating state FFA officers ( $N=3,283$ ) using the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment tool, who, by a combination of the state association and the student leader, chose to participate from 2006-2010, 2012-2015. Unfortunately, the exact number of state FFA officers is not collected each year, as the number is not static. In some associations, regional officers or presidents are considered state FFA officers, and thus train together. Additionally, in some years and in some states, there are not enough qualified students to fill the role of a state FFA officer. Since the number is not reported, the exact percent of the total population is not available to report. It should also be noted that the National FFA Organization requests state associations to report this data each year and it is rarely 100% reported.

### **Instrument Selection**

According to Buckingham & Clifton in *Now Discover Your Strengths* (2001), the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> is a

Web-based assessment consisting of normal personality from the perspective of positive psychology. It is the first assessment developed expressly for the internet. There are 180 items in StrengthsFinder, presented to the user over a secure connection. Each item lists a pair of potential self-descriptors, such as “I read instructions carefully” and “I like to jump right into things.” The descriptors are placed as if anchoring polar ends of a continuum. The participant is then asked to choose which statement in the pair best describes him or her, and also to what extent

that chosen option is descriptive. The participant is given twenty seconds to respond to a given item before the system moves on to the next item. (StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> developmental research showed that the twenty-second limit resulted in a negligible item noncompletion rate). The item pairs are grouped into thirty-four themes (p. 248).

The Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment has been vetted through aspects of validity, reliability and consistency, and the intent is to provide a broad overview of that pertinent information. Validity, specifically content validity, has shown evidence of strength in its results, as well as, deeper exploration into construct validity has shown no problem with multicollinearity (Asplund, et.al, 2009). Criterion-related validity studies have shown positive results in comparison to other well-validated personality instruments similar to the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> (Harter & Hodges, 2003; Schreiner, 2006). Schreiner (2006) measured construct validity in two ways, comparing Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> student results to the same students taking two similar inventories, the California Psychological Inventory (Gough & Bradley, 1996) and the 16PF (Cattell, 1993). “93.4% of these predictions were confirmed by significant correlation coefficients” as well as the “average item clustering percentage across all possible theme pairs was 90%” (Schreiner, 2006, p. 7). A number of studies exist that have examined the overall usefulness of the instrument and such evidence to strongly support positive utility is easily found across a number of outlets (Clifton & Harter, 2003; Schreiner, 2006; Bayer, 2012; Lane & Chapman, 2011; Stebleton, et al., 2012; Wisner, 2011; Gillum, 2005; Lehnert, 2009).

Two types of reliability estimates were used to examine the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> internal consistency using Cronbach’s alpha, as well as, test-retest reliability (Asplund, et. al, 2009). Test-retest correlations were generally consistent; however, the reliability of the score

profile is also critical and a Chi-Square test of independence was conducted on each theme (Asplund, et.al, 2009). The results of this test indicated that 33 of the 34 themes had significant results, indicating evidence of stability for those themes. However, one theme, self-assurance, was less stable over time in this particular study (Asplund, et.al, 2009). The test-retest reliability was also examined by Schreiner (2006) in the 438 usable, completed student results, by taking the assessment a second time 8-12 weeks after the first (while not receiving their results) and the mean score was .70.

### **Data Collection**

Through several conversations with National FFA Staff, the concept of analyzing the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> data had become a point of interest for the organization and state FFA officer programs. As this data was an existing data set of the National FFA Organization, approval of an Institutional Review Board was not necessary in this situation. However, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was drafted, completed and signed in the fall semester of 2015 between the Department of Agricultural Education and Studies at Iowa State University and the Education Division at the National FFA Organization, (Appendix C) to establish the parameters of the research and relationship.

The raw Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> data was obtained from the National FFA Organization in the fall semester of 2015. In the spring 2016 semester, additional data was collected regarding the process by which state FFA officers are selected. This data was collected with cooperation from the National FFA Organization, who provided the contact information of all state association staff who oversee state FFA officer programs (Appendix D). The selection process data was collected via electronic survey using Qualtrics, and was reviewed for content validity by a National FFA staff member, a past state FFA staff member



and a current agricultural education professor. A sample template for the email communication with state staff is Appendix E. Any states not responding to the initial survey were contacted in a second attempt, then via an alternative method(s) if available. If a response was still not collected, contact of a relevant past state FFA officer or current state FFA officer was utilized to collect the selection process information.

It should be noted that the selection process information collected is categorical in nature, and does not include specific details of the content within selection rounds; furthermore, this information is generally considered public information. Through these attempts, selection process information could not be verified in Maine, Puerto Rico and West Virginia. A detailed account of the selection process data collected is listed in figure F1 in Appendix F. An overview of the data collected is listed below in Table 3.1.

*Table 3.1*

*Data Information*

Data collected	Source	Time collected/received
StrengthsFinder® data; 2006-2010; 2012-2015	National FFA Organization	Fall Semester 2015
Selection Process Information	State Staff or State Officer	Spring Semester 2016

### **Data Analysis**

Raw Clifton StrengthsFinder® data was provided from National FFA, and after organizing the data in Microsoft® Excel, it was analyzed for frequencies and percentages utilizing JMP software for objective one, examining the diversity of state FFA officer talents. The selection process information was coded and attached to state demographic information and relating student data in Microsoft® Excel, and then it was analyzed for frequencies and percentages utilizing JMP software for objective two, StrengthsFinder® themes compared to

the process used to elect officers. Lastly, in Microsoft® Excel, the themes were coded into the leadership domains of executing, influencing, relationship building and strategic thinking. After this coding, it was analyzed for frequencies and percentages utilizing JMP software for objective three, analyzing state FFA officers talents according to the strength-based domains of leadership utilizing the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment data.

### **Limitations**

There are some limitations to this research. The convenience sample of state FFA officers is not a random sample; therefore, generalizations beyond this population sample of the data should be cautioned. Bias is possible in convenience sampling and proves to be a strong disadvantage (Gass & Mackey, 2012). Additionally, it should be noted that the Clifton StrengthsFinder® tool is a self-identified assessment. There are possibilities for participants to have an inaccurate self-image or desired self-image in mind when completing the assessment. Furthermore, this data was not originally purposed for research, and therefore does not have additional demographic information that would be helpful for analysis and comparisons.

### **Summary**

The research design is that of a convenience sample of participating state FFA officers ( $N=3,283$ ) using the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment tool, who, by a combination of the state association and the student leader, choose to participate. Unfortunately, the exact number of state FFA officers is not collected each year as the number is not static. Data was collected on the process in which state FFA officers are selected. The data was analyzed for frequencies and percentages utilizing JMP software and

Microsoft® Excel. There are limitations to this study because of the convenience sample, lack of additional demographic information, and the nature of self-assessment.

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**CHAPTER IV. STRENGTHS OF STATE FFA OFFICERS THROUGH THE YEARS****2006-2010 and 2012-2015**

A paper prepared for submission to the *Journal of Agricultural Education*

**Denise Mills****Dr. Ryan Anderson****Dr. Thomas Paulsen****Abstract**

*The depth and strength of agricultural professions, in all facets, rely on self-aware and purposed-driven individuals armed with accurate confidence in personal competencies. In this descriptive study, a convenience sample of state FFA officers (N=3,283) in the National FFA Organization were administered the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment, from 2006-2010 and 2012-2015, as a tool provided by the National FFA Organization as part of a state FFA officer leadership training program. This pre-existing data was studied and outlines the trends in the top five signature talent themes of this sample population, the most frequently shared talents in this sample are Achiever (36.83%), Responsibility (32.17%), Restorative (29.33%), Includer (28.88%) and Learner (25.46%). Authentic leaders have a profound sense of self, which can be essential in shaping a strengths-based organization (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Strengths provide an opportunity to develop state FFA officer self-awareness and authentic leadership skills that are highly transferable to current student interests and any future schooling or career path chosen. Future research recommendations include following up with a random selection of state officer teams at the conclusion of their state officer year with reflection on the impact, utility and rigor of strengths, and strengths training program may shed valuable insight. Additionally, a one-*

*year, post survey, followed by a five-year post survey, could also help identify the impact and utility of the strengths component to state FFA officers. The State and National FFA Organizations should also consider these findings with regard to all leadership development programming. Also including a random sample population of students to complete the StrengthsFinder® assessment both in FFA and not in FFA could provide an opportunity for comparison in student talents, which lay groundwork in relation to student motivations, interests, and retention.*

### **Introduction**

Students today want to pursue careers that will be personally and professionally rewarding, and are aligned with their values and interests, which are also under a state of change (National Research Council, 2009). Well known, the basis of the National FFA Organization is reflected in the mission, “FFA makes a positive difference in the lives of students by developing their potential for premier leadership, personal growth and career success through agricultural education” (National FFA Organization, 2016, p. 7). Every student is unique, has individual needs, interests, motivations and aspirations. Better understanding the diversity of students in our classrooms may provide more understanding of effective educational practices, and could lead to improved learning environments (Woolfolk, 2010). Nurturing and growing leadership skills are essential for students who are developing professional competencies and majoring in the field of agricultural and life sciences (Strong, Wynn, Irby, & Lindner, 2013).

Recently, Velez, McKim, Moore and Stephens (2015) identified “agricultural leadership education opportunities are prevalent and growing across the nation,” (p. 124). Modern views of leadership focus more on authenticity, with the concept that leaders are

most effective when they are being themselves and holding true to that (Linley, Govindji, & West, 2007). The depth and strength of the agricultural profession, in all facets, rely on self-aware and purposed-driven individuals armed with accurate confidence in personal competencies. Providing empowerment and preparation in this self-awareness and understanding others paves the way to be agents of social change (Wisner, 2011). The rapid pace of today's societal change makes learning part of almost every environment and effectively connecting with people in those environments can be pivotal in success (Clifton, et al., 2006).

Horstmeier and Nall (2007) explored youth leadership development from a national perspective on FFA member role and activity context in 2007. Recommendations from the study highlight a perpetuation of members experiencing a continuum of leadership development activities, which should include an emphasis on assisting youth to gain skills that help them better understand self and interaction with others (Horstmeier & Nall, 2007). While each agricultural education program and community is unique, an interesting perspective was gleaned from this research. The study goes on to bring attention to the potential need for even more opportunities of community and group development experiences to plug in the adequate personal development experiences (Horstmeier & Nall, 2007).

Development of state FFA officers was considered in a study completed by Hoover & Bruce (2006) where they evaluated that holding a state level FFA office engages youth in self-exploration and discovery of strengths and weaknesses. In addition, it provides an avenue to receive recognition for competence, which is a long-term consequence associated with serving as a state FFA officer in Pennsylvania. Results also indicated support of positive



adolescent development, transference of leadership skills, and purposeful civic and community engagement (Hoover & Bruce, 2006) were also benefits.

Two identified contributions, recruitment of new students to the college of agriculture and leadership in campus organizations, were identified as being made to undergraduate student leadership involvement by former 4-H and FFA members (Park & Dyer, 2005). Park and Dyer (2005) examined potential relationships between involvement in FFA and 4-H and increased undergraduate student leadership involvement at a land-grant college of agriculture.

Nearly 500 colleges and universities have explored the application of strengths (Bowers & Lopez, 2010). At Michigan Ross School of Business, students who reported having a strong understanding of their own strengths were more engaged with school and more hopeful for the future (Gallup, 2016). While they measured success in multiple ways, the University of Southern Maine initially sought the strengths program to aid efforts to increase first-year students' retention and a slight increase in retention was noted (McCarville, 2016).

Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee (2002) discussed how “the ability of a leader to pitch a group into an enthusiastic, cooperative mood can determine its success. On the other hand, whenever emotional conflicts in a group bleed attention and energy from their shared tasks, a group's performance will suffer,” (p.14). In a study by Lehnert (2009) results indicated that participants who engaged in the strengths training thus reported greater gains on the five dimensions of Kouzes and Posner's (2007) Leadership Challenge Model. These ideas all support the key role of not only strengths awareness and utilization of self-identified strengths, but also those of teammates' strengths. Five practices uncovered common to

personal-best leadership experiences, which are part of the model, include model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Analyzing through strengths-colored glasses, according to the research, has shown that one can view their self, their future, and others all differently (Clifton, et al., 2006).

Finding out what gives meaning to others' efforts proves as an element of envisioning the future (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Utilizing strengths has been associated with significantly higher levels of happiness, well-being and fulfillment, leading to a greater degree of authenticity (Linley, et al., 2007). At a midwestern university, students reported influential leadership growth upon receiving their strengths results (Bayer, 2012). Another study supported that the "focus on students' strengths fostered a positive perception of the university and encouraged students to feel as though they uniquely and positively impacted the university community with their particular combination of strengths" (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015, p. 630).

Analysis of state FFA officer teams can provide insight into the true diversity of talents among student members, while providing a glimpse towards the future. Balancing work according to the strengths of the team and of the collective introduces a higher-level of strengths implementation and strengths-based teamwork (Linley, et. al. 2007). Buckingham & Clifton (2001) discuss how all strengths have a 'shadow side', underscoring the importance to find balance with using strengths, not to let them overpower other people or talents inappropriately. Organizations like the National FFA Organization are challenged to keep pace with society, while continuing to prepare students for vigorous personal growth

and provide unique and challenging leadership opportunities, which can pave a solid path to a number of experiences that lead to career success.

The Clifton StrengthsFinder® is a web-based assessment that measures the presence of 34 talents organized into themes (Clifton, et al., 2006). A theme is a category of talents, which are defined as recurring and consistent patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). The intentional purpose of the assessment is to nurture personal growth through discussion with others and to be a tool for self-awareness (Asplund, Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2009).

Figure 4.1

Talent	Definition
Achiever®	People exceptionally talented in the Achiever theme work hard and possess a great deal of stamina. They take immense satisfaction in being busy and productive.
Activator®	People exceptionally talented in the Activator theme can make things happen by turning thoughts into action. They are often impatient.
Adaptability®	People exceptionally talented in the Adaptability theme prefer to go with the flow. They tend to be “now” people who take things as they come and discover the future one day at a time.
Analytical®	People exceptionally talented in the Analytical theme search for reasons and causes. They have the ability to think about all the factors that might affect a situation.
Arranger™	People exceptionally talented in the Arranger theme can organize, but they also have a flexibility that complements this ability. They like to determine how all of the pieces and resources can be arranged for maximum productivity.
Belief®	People exceptionally talented in the Belief theme have certain core values that are unchanging. Out of these values emerges a defined purpose for their lives.
Command®	People exceptionally talented in the Command theme have presence. They can take control of a situation and make decisions.

## Figure 4.1 continued

Communication <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Communication theme generally find it easy to put their thoughts into words. They are good conversationalists and presenters.
Competition <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Competition theme measure their progress against the performance of others. They strive to win first place and revel in contests.
Connectedness <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Connectedness theme have faith in the links among all things. They believe there are few coincidences and that almost every event has meaning.
Consistency <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Consistency theme are keenly aware of the need to treat people the same. They try to treat everyone with equality by setting up clear rules and adhering to them.
Context <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Context theme enjoy thinking about the past. They understand the present by researching its history.
Deliberative <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Deliberative theme are best described by the serious care they take in making decisions or choices. They anticipate obstacles.
Developer <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Developer theme recognize and cultivate the potential in others. They spot the signs of each small improvement and derive satisfaction from evidence of progress.
Discipline <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Discipline theme enjoy routine and structure. Their world is best described by the order they create.
Empathy <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Empathy theme can sense other people's feelings by imagining themselves in others' lives or situations.
Focus <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Focus theme can take a direction, follow through, and make the corrections necessary to stay on track. They prioritize, then act.
Futuristic <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Futuristic theme are inspired by the future and what could be. They energize others with their visions of the future.
Harmony <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Harmony theme look for consensus. They don't enjoy conflict; rather they seek areas of agreement.

## Figure 4.1 continued

Ideation <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Ideation theme are fascinated by ideas. They are able to find connections between seemingly disparate phenomena.
Includer <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Includer theme accept others. They show awareness of those who feel left out and make an effort to include them.
Individualization <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Individualization theme are intrigued with the unique qualities of each person. They have a gift for figuring out how different people can work together productively.
Input <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Input theme have a craving to know more. Often they like to collect and archive all kinds of information.
Intellection <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Intellection theme are characterized by their intellectual activity. They are introspective and appreciate intellectual discussions.
Learner <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Learner theme have a great desire to learn and want to continuously improve. The process of learning, rather than the outcome, excites them.
Maximizer <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Maximizer theme focus on strength as a way to stimulate personal and group excellence. They seek to transform something strong into something superb.
Positivity <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Positivity theme have contagious enthusiasm. They are upbeat and can get others excited about what they are going to do.
Relator <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Relator theme enjoy close relationships with others. They find deep satisfaction in working hard with friends to achieve a goal.
Responsibility <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Responsibility theme take psychological ownership of what they say they will do. They are committed to stable values such as honesty and loyalty.
Restorative <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Restorative theme are adept at dealing with problems. They are good at figuring out what is wrong and resolving it.
Self-Assurance <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Self-Assurance theme feel confident in their ability to manage their own lives. They possess an inner compass that gives them confidence that their decisions are right.

Figure 4.1 continued

Significance™	People exceptionally talented in the Significance theme want to be very important in others' eyes. They are independent and want to be recognized.
Strategic™	People exceptionally talented in the Strategic theme create alternative ways to proceed. Faced with any given scenario, they can quickly spot the relevant patterns and issues.
WOO™	People exceptionally talented in the Woo theme love the challenge of meeting new people and winning them over. They derive satisfaction from breaking the ice and making a connection with someone.

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Knowing talents and areas of potential strength help individuals become more of who they are. Strengths identification and development can be an aid to being a more genuine version of self. StrengthsFinder® helps “find where you have the greatest potential for a strength”(p. 78) by aiming to “identify the strongest aspects of your mental network, your signature themes” (p. 141) (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001).

### **Conceptual Framework**

Authentic leadership serves as one piece of framework for this study. Luthans and Avolio (2003) outlined authentic leadership in the context of an organization as “a process that draws from both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which results in both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors on the part of leaders” (pg. 243). Begley (2004) described authentic leadership as “a function of self-knowledge, sensitivity to the orientation of others, and a technical sophistication that leads to a synergy of leadership action” (p. 5). Each definition contains similar language and components, yet they are stated in slightly different perspectives. Through the authentic leadership research agenda and Gallup Leadership Institute associates, Avolio, Gardner, Luthans, May, Walumba, and colleagues worked on a more refined definition (Garner,

Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011). “Authentic leadership is a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development” (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008, p. 94). Across these variances in interpretation of authentic leadership, one component has been widely agreed upon as the beginning of authentic leadership development, a leader’s self-awareness (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Wisner (2011) outlined how authentic leadership development is a theory that promotes the development of strengths and is rooted in positive psychology. She goes on to discuss that even though further research is needed to fully understand the impact of strengths ownership on leadership effectiveness, indications exist that effective leadership behaviors in her college student sample may be increased through the development of psychological strengths (Wisner, 2011). Avolio & Gardner’s (2005) key distinction of authentic leaders was “anchored by their own deep sense of self” (p. 329) and that “authentic leadership can help develop and shape a strength-based organization” (p. 334).

### **Purpose and Objectives**

State FFA officers have the opportunity to complete a rigorous training and curriculum program offered by the National FFA Organization as part of the state FFA officer continuum. Some states actively utilize the strengths concepts and resources throughout the year of office, while others do not utilize the Clifton StrengthsFinder® program at all, or beyond utilization of just the initial assessment. The data from the state officers who have completed the assessment provided by the National FFA Organization has

been collected since 2006, yet has not been analyzed for student development information and insights.

As outlined by Roberts, Harder and Brashears (2016) in the 2016-2020 Agricultural Education Research Agenda in Priority Area 3, Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce That Addresses the Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the need to investigate soft skill development and preparedness, as well as, agricultural recruitment and retention, is necessary to address this priority. The existing body of research specific to agricultural education leadership settings is growing. Analysis of state FFA officer data could provide foundational information in student leadership insight into soft skill development, as well as, student recruitment and retention to leadership programs, and potentially the FFA. The strengths revolution is focused on utilizing differences in each person and building the organization around those differences (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001).

The purpose of this study was to analyze and examine self-identified talents among state FFA officers spanning nearly a decade of student leaders ( $N=3,283$ ) with data collected from the National FFA Organization. This was accomplished through the following objective:

1. Analyze diversity of the top five talents of state FFA officers, as talent is identified by the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment.

### **Methodology**

The focus of this paper is to identify and explore self-identified talents among state FFA officers spanning nearly a decade of student leader data collected by the National FFA Organization in this pre-existing data set. The research design was that of a convenience sample of participating state FFA officers in the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment tool,



who, by a combination of the state association and the student leader, chose to participate. Unfortunately, the exact number of state FFA officers is not collected each year, as the number is not static. In some state associations, regional officers or presidents are considered state FFA officers who thus train together. Since this total number of officers is not consistently reported, therefore, the exact percent of the total population is not available to report. The structure of the National FFA Organization's state officer leadership resources, specifically the utilization of the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment, is the basis of this research. All states' FFA associations are provided, free of charge, the opportunity and information to distribute an access code to state FFA officers in order to utilize the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment. Once a student completes the assessment, the signature, top five themes of talent are recorded and available to the National FFA Organization. Resources are available to assist the officer and association with further development and information in regards to each officer's talents. According to Clifton, et al. (2006) in *StrengthsQuest*, the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> is a, "Web-based talent assessment consisting of 180 item-pairs (with five response options), presented to the user over a secure connection." Clifton et al. further states that,

Each item-pair of potential self-descriptors, such as 'I read instructions carefully' and 'I like to jump right into things' are placed as if anchoring polar ends of a continuum. The participant is then asked to choose from that pair the statement that best describes him or her, and to the extent to which that chosen option is descriptive of him or her. The participant is given 20 seconds to respond to each pair of items before the system moves on to the next item-pair. Upon completion, the respondent receives feedback including his or her top five themes and related action items (p. 301).

Using Microsoft® Excel to organize the themes, and when present, attaching the state association demographic, the data was then analyzed using JMP for frequency and percent.

Helping individuals identify natural positive talents, the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment was built on the concept of positive psychology, and has been vetted through aspects of validity, reliability, consistency, and utility. Content validity has shown evidence of strength in its results, as well as, deeper exploration into construct validity has shown no problem with multicollinearity (Asplund, et.al, 2009). Criterion-related validity studies have shown positive results in comparison to other well-validated personality instruments similar to the Clifton StrengthsFinder® (Harter & Hodges, 2003; Schreiner, 2006). Schreiner (2006) conducted a study across 14 colleges and universities with  $N=438$  usable sample and measured construct validity in two ways, comparing Clifton StrengthsFinder® student results to the same students taking two similar inventories, the California Psychological Inventory (Gough & Bradley, 1996) and the 16PF (Cattell, 1993). “93.4% of these predictions were confirmed by significant correlation coefficients”, as well as, the “average item clustering percentage across all possible theme pairs was 90%” (Schreiner, 2006, p.7). A number of studies exist that have shown such evidence to strongly support positive utility and are easily found across a number of outlets (Schreiner, 2006; Bayer, 2012; Lane & Chapman, 2011; Stebleton, Soria & Albecker, 2012; Wisner, 2011; Gillum, 2005; Lehnert, 2009).

Two types of reliability estimates were used to examine the Clifton StrengthsFinder®, internal consistency using Cronbach’s alpha, as well as, test-retest reliability (Asplund, et. al, 2009). Test-retest correlations were generally consistent; however, the reliability of the score profile is also critical and a Chi-Square test of independence was conducted on each theme. (Asplund, et.al, 2009). Evidence of stability for 33 of the 34 themes had significant results;

however, one theme, self-assurance, was less stable over time in Asplund's study (Asplund, et.al., 2009). The test-retest reliability was also examined and deemed appropriate by Schreiner (2006) by taking the assessment a second time 8-12 weeks after the first, and after not receiving their results, the mean score was .70, an acceptable measure.

StrengthsFinder® data has shown benefits to teachers in effective teaching and responding to youth (Educational Horizons, 2006). Research has revealed the idea of three possible stages of strengths development: talent identification, integration and acceptance of one's talents followed with changed behaviors (Hodges & Harter, 2005). Exploration of leadership development from a strengths perspective serves as an alternative path to evaluate leadership development practices. Interviews administered by Gallup analysts to more than two-million individuals were reviewed and generated into data that was used to capitalize on the accumulated knowledge and experience of strengths-based practice (Asplund, et al., 2009). Currently, the assessment is available in over 20 different languages, and after a revision in 2006, these 180 items were reduced to 177. These items are grouped into 34 themes, which are listed in Table 4.1 (Clifton, et. al. 2006).

## **Results**

The objective of this study sought to analyze the talent diversity among the sample of state FFA officers as identified by the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment. Table 4.1 includes the frequencies and percentages of all 34 talent themes across the sample state officer population throughout the entire data collection period. Achiever and Responsibility were the two most frequently shared talents across state FFA officers. Achiever occurred 1,209 times in 3,283 state FFA officers at a frequency of 36.83%. Responsibility occurred 1,056 times in 3,283 state FFA officers at a frequency of 32.17%. Command and Intellection

were located at the bottom of the talent frequencies, occurring 162 times at 4.93% and 137 times at 4.17% respectively. Achiever, Responsibility, Restorative, Includer, and Learner were the most frequently shared talents among state FFA officers from 2006-2010, 2012-2015. However, across all years, eight of the ten most commonly shared talents were consistently ranked in the top ten of each data collection year. Achiever, Responsibility, Restorative, Includer, Belief, Positivity, WOO and Learner are of the most consistently shared in the top ten each year among state FFA officers from 2006-2010, 2012-2015. It should also be noted that all 34 talent themes occurred in the sample population of officers.

Table 4.1

*2006-2010, 2012-2015, Frequency of strengths in the top 5 themes of talent measured*

Strength	<i>f</i>	%
Achiever	1209	36.83
Responsibility	1056	32.17
Restorative	963	29.33
Includer	948	28.88
Learner	836	25.46
Belief	788	24.00
WOO	772	23.52
Positivity	751	22.86
Input	648	19.74
Communication	630	19.19
Strategic	607	18.49
Adaptability	557	16.97
Futuristic	534	16.27
Relator	502	15.29
Harmony	494	15.05
Arranger	475	14.47
Developer	474	14.44
Competition	457	13.92
Individualization	367	11.18
Context	362	11.03
Focus	314	9.56
Ideation	281	8.56
Significance	270	8.22
Activator	250	7.61
Empathy	228	6.94

Table 4.1 continued

Strength	<i>f</i>	%
Discipline	219	6.67
Maximizer	202	6.15
Consistency	194	5.91
Self-Assurance	192	5.85
Analytical	182	5.54
Connectedness	177	5.39
Deliberative	177	5.39
Command	162	4.93
Intellection	137	4.17

Table 4.2 outlines the top ten most frequently shared talents each data collection year. In 2006,  $N=398$  state FFA officers, outlining the top two themes, 131 have Achiever in their top five talents which is 32.91%, followed closely by Responsibility with 120 occurrences at 30.15%.

In 2007,  $N=390$  state FFA officers, outlining the top two themes, Achiever occurred 149 times at 38.21%, followed by Responsibility at 117 instances and 30.00%.

In 2008,  $N=338$  state FFA officers, the top two themes, Achiever occurred 135 times at 39.94% and Responsibility occurred 112 times at 33.14%.

In 2009,  $N=381$  state FFA officers who took the assessment, and this year's data showed Responsibility as the most commonly shared talent, occurring 133 times at 34.91%, while Achiever occurred 129 times at 33.86%.

In 2010, Achiever edged back to the most commonly shared talent of the  $N=372$  state FFA officers. Achiever occurred 142 times at 38.17% while Responsibility was shared 139 times at 37.37%.

Interestingly in 2012, of the  $N=354$  state FFA officers who took the assessment, Achiever still tops the list, which occurred 130 times at 36.72%, while Responsibility fell to third most commonly shared. Includer became the second on the list, which occurred 124

times at 35.03%. Responsibility still held on to a 31.92% shared trait among the state FFA officers in the 2012 data.

In 2013, Achiever still continued to be the most commonly shared talent of the  $N=328$  state FFA officers, 121 had Achiever in their top five occurring at 36.89%. Responsibility measured in at the second most commonly shared among the 2013 officers, occurring 102 times at 31.10%. Includer and Restorative measured in at third at 30.18%.

The  $N=372$  state FFA officers who participated in the assessment in 2014, shared Achiever as their most commonly shared talent, occurring 148 times at 39.78% and Restorative as the second most common at 118 times and 31.72%. Responsibility stayed just above 30% as third most commonly shared.

In 2015, of the  $N=350$  state FFA officers who took the assessment, surprisingly Restorative reigned in as the most commonly shared talent, 130 shared at 37.14%. While Achiever became the second most commonly shared in 124 officers at 35.43%. Responsibility still occurred at 30.86% in 108 students.

Table 4.2

*2006-2010, 2012-2015, Top 10 Most Frequently Shared Strengths*

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2012	2013	2014	2015
	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)
Achiever	131 (32.91)	149 (38.21)	135 (39.94)	129 (33.86)	142 (38.17)	130 (36.72)	121 (36.89)	148 (39.78)	124 (35.43)
Adaptability			65 (19.23)	66 (17.32)					
Belief	96 (24.12)	91 (23.33)	85 (25.15)	82 (21.52)	89 (23.92)	91 (25.71)	78 (23.78)	80 (21.51)	96 (27.43)
Communication			74 (21.89)	91 (23.88)	69 (18.56)	75 (21.19)	64 (19.51)		
Developer						68 (19.21)	60 (18.29)		
Futuristic					70 (18.82)			69 (18.55)	67 (19.14)
Includer	102 (25.63)	105 (26.92)	109 (32.25)	98 (25.72)	114 (30.65)	124 (35.03)	99 (30.18)	106 (28.49)	91 (26.00)
Input		84 (21.54)	69 (20.41)	82 (21.52)	70 (18.81)		59 (17.99)	79 (21.24)	74 (21.14)
Learner	98 (24.62)	80 (20.51)	86 (25.44)	101 (26.51)	106 (28.49)	99 (27.96)	86 (26.22)	98 (26.34)	82 (23.43)
Positivity	78 (19.60)	93 (23.85)	79 (23.37)	83 (21.78)	83 (22.31)	95 (26.84)	87 (26.52)	77 (20.70)	76 (21.71)
Relator	99 (24.87)	110 (28.21)							
Responsibility	120 (30.15)	117 (30.00)	112 (33.14)	133 (34.91)	139 (37.37)	113 (31.92)	102 (31.10)	112 (30.11)	108 (30.86)
Restorative	105 (26.38)	88 (22.56)	101 (29.88)	108 (28.35)	120 (32.26)	94 (26.55)	99 (30.18)	118 (31.72)	130 (37.14)
Strategic	84 (21.11)	85 (21.79)			73 (19.62)	68 (19.21)	59 (17.99)	71 (19.09)	
WOO	100 (25.13)	105 (26.92)	86 (25.44)	94 (24.67)	70 (18.82)	79 (22.32)	80 (24.39)	77 (20.70)	81 (23.14)

## Conclusions and Discussion

State FFA officers are members who have sought out the opportunity to serve the organization in the capacity of a student leader. The sample population of state FFA officers shows a diversity of all represented talent themes. With Achiever and Responsibility as two of the most frequently occurring themes in the sample, as a majority, state FFA officers are driven and highly accountable students. With Command and Intellection as the two least occurring in the sample, this population less frequently takes charge of situations or quietly thinks to themselves.

Looking deeper into the definitions of Achiever and Responsibility in the context of the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment, even more insight can be gained. An Achiever is driven by accomplishment, and therefore keeps very busy and productive (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Students in the organization, specifically state FFA officers, are generally seen as driven individuals, diligently working to accomplish the next task at hand. The organization is saturated with opportunities for student achievement, officer positions, competitions, scholarships and awards, which all appeal to students high in the talent of Achiever. An individual with the Achiever talent finds a reoccurring drive to accomplish, consistently pushing for more each day. A state officer with this talent will relentlessly seek accomplishments, facing challenge after challenge. Balance for the Achiever theme is important to encourage those with this talent to not take on too much, or be driven to accomplish things without it being purposed. Embracing the drive in state officers with this talent could find a positive impact in the organization, the agricultural classroom, and society.



The Responsibility theme stirs the need to take ownership over everything said, done or committed to doing (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). This sense of ownership marries quite well with the Achiever theme and further leads to the reputation of state FFA officers that not only are driven to accomplish whatever is at hand, but also have the sense of responsibility to see that it is done. The FFA touts the need for a high sense of responsibility in young people throughout agriculture, attracting a high number of state FFA officers with a natural talent of Responsibility. Balancing the talent of Responsibility is necessary, it can also overwhelm individuals into taking on more than realistically can be accomplished. Young people in agriculture that are high in the theme of Responsibility are vitally necessary as continued misinformation floods media outlets, confusing and misleading consumers and the public about food and agriculture.

The Restorative talent speaks to problem solvers, who are energized by identifying and examining symptoms and solutions (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Restorative state FFA officers can find potential impact when examining challenges and seeking solutions for these challenges, whether in the organization, the classroom, in relationships or in agriculture. Seeking balance for the Restorative talent is necessary to ensure the drive for solutions doesn't overtake the bigger picture. Many agricultural courses have become more focused on problem-based learning. Is this drawing a stronger contingency of naturally Restorative talented young people to the FFA? The potential challenges that lie ahead in food and agriculture can be overwhelming at times. This surprising number of Restorative young people, ready to take on the challenges of any type of problem, is comforting to see in these young agriculturalists.

Being an Includer provides for the desire to make others feel included and part of the group (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). State FFA officers can utilize this talent to support and encourage younger members in the organization, and draw new ones to the table.

Inclusiveness can promote a welcoming environment that nurtures participation and engagement. A relationship to the official dress of the organization, something as simple as the unity of the FFA jacket, may potentially be appealing to this high number of students who are naturally talented and drawn to inclusion. As demographics of the nation continue to change, appreciation for the talent of Includer in the National FFA Organization among student leaders will potentially have an impact on current members, as well as, those that may be considering joining the organization.

Learners, quite simply, love to learn and are drawn to the process of learning (Clifton, et. al., 2006). As agriculture is an ever-evolving field, those with the natural talent of a Learner would tend to be drawn to it by the nature of learning. Serving as a state FFA officer can offer a large learning curve to many, finding a large component of state FFA officers naturally talented in this ability could support this relationship. This love of learning will potentially transcend to future endeavors, a continued desire to learn more, in career skills and technical training, in post-secondary education, graduate courses and adult education programs. This constantly changing field of agriculture will require those with this drive to not just sustain that need, but also to exceed that expectation.

A strong Belief theme indicates that an individual holds certain core values that are enduring (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). These values shape everything one does, and quite frankly, why they do it. The FFA has strong traditions and foundations, is it really a surprise that student leaders strong in the Belief talent are found in this organization? Those high in

the Belief theme find a demand to have meaning behind what one does and meaning that meshes with those core values (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001).

Always looking on the positive side of any situation is what the talent theme of Positivity is simply all about (Clifton, et. al., 2006). Positivity can be contagious, and state FFA officers with this talent can impact a number of other members they encounter throughout their experience. Recognizing students with this talent and approaching experiences in school and in life can be impacted with a positive perspective.

WOO stands for winning others over, and embraces the challenge of meeting new people and getting them to like you (Clifton, et. al., 2006). In fact, people strong in this talent are energized from this process, continually seeking opportunities to do it over and over again. This is a useful talent to have as a state FFA officer, since a large part of their responsibilities include meeting new people both in and out of the organization.

Looking at the less common strengths shared among state FFA officers in their top 5 themes is also revealing. The five least commonly occurring strengths in state FFA officers across this data period were Deliberative, Analytical, Connectedness, Command and Intellection. The Deliberative talent is expressed as a careful, vigilant, private person that carefully assesses each decision (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). As one considers this nature described in a person with the talent of Deliberative, questions arise that if the instant access and gratification rich in today's world has impacted this talent, is it not as prevalent in young people? Or, is it not as prevalent among state FFA officers? The Analytical theme shows an appreciation of data while being objective and dispassionate (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). This theme provides a necessary challenge at times to question ideas and look deeper past emotions to proof. Someone that can provide this talent, and naturally have the ability to look

deeper beyond emotions of situations, may have a profound impact on any challenge encountered. Consider the high number of controversial issues involved in agriculture, someone that has the natural ability to wade through these types of challenges and evaluate evidence in light of varying emotions may be necessary to advancing the organization and the industry. The Connectedness talent allows someone to see the relationships and connections among all things, embracing that everything happens for a reason (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). The natural talent of seeing connections among things could be of value to the FFA and agriculture allowing a perspective that may provide others a sense of being part of something bigger.

Command and Intellection weigh in at less than five percent of the time occurring in state FFA officers' top signature themes. Individuals high in the talent of Command have a desire and need to take charge and share their opinions with others (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Confrontation is accepted as part of the process towards resolution, and is not avoided by most individuals high in the talent of Command (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). State FFA officers high in Command may find this talent a natural fit for seeking opportunities, which allow them to exercise this sense of authority. The talent of Intellection is about liking to think and enjoying mental activity, even in multiple directions (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). This introspective nature tends to be noted as someone who likes time alone or time to think. Nurturing this talent in state FFA officers can provide a valuable resource to a group or team as someone who has taken some time to think about situations, solutions and questions. Why are these strengths are found less frequently among state FFA officers? Serving as a state FFA officer does present as a team experience. Do individuals strong in the talent of Intellection and Command feel less embraced to serve on a team of officers? Do FFA

programs and opportunities discourage these abilities from flourishing in students? Does FFA not attract students with these talents, or are these talents simply not as prevalent across young people taking the assessment or in today's youth?

Notably, all 34 themes of talent are represented across the 3,283 state FFA officers represented in this data, ranging from 4.17% to 36.83% in the top 5 themes. Diversity among state FFA officers is quite visible with this array of talents while common themes also bring these students together. Strong representation and shared talents of Achiever and Responsibility fuel this collective group to 'do' much with this broad representation of student talents.

Embracing the complex facets of each talent encountered could be a huge step in embracing a greater self-awareness. Authentic leadership promotes a nurturing environment towards greater self-awareness, internalization of moral perspectives, balanced processing and relational transparency, ultimately advancing positive self-development (Walumbwa, et al., 2008). Furthermore, objectively considering how talents can grow into strengths and honestly recognizing non-strengths could be considered a component of internalization and balanced processing. Relational transparency can build from learning about teammates' strengths and considering other's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors about these strengths as well as their own. Potentially each of these steps in authentic leadership development could find a parallel in state FFA officer strengths development.

Authentic leadership connects back to the intentional purpose of the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment, which is to nurture personal growth and be utilized as a tool for self-awareness (Asplund, et al., 2009). What will a greater number of self-aware students in FFA and agricultural education truly mean? What impact can a greater number of self-aware

students with the talent of Achiever have on the agricultural education world? Are those students aware of their talents in Responsibility? Restorative? Inclusion? Learners? Although true strengths development takes the ability to hone and develop natural talents, so they can be harnessed for best benefits, do opportunities in the FFA organization encourage students with any talent to join the organization? Does the opportunity to serve as a state FFA officer attract all facets of FFA members, at least in the context of talent diversity? Does this state FFA officer population data also represent the talent statistics across the general membership of the National FFA Organization? Are some talents more or less common among the general student population? What about just agricultural education students? Furthermore, do the programs and opportunities in the National FFA Organization nurture all students with a variety of talents, or does the organization attract certain students with specific natural abilities more readily?

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Positive psychology applied in modern views of leadership are more positioned around the concept of authenticity, simply stating that the most effective leaders are being themselves and being true to themselves (Linley, et. al, 2007). As noted by the National Research Council (2009), today's students want careers that will be not only personally and professionally rewarding, but are also aligned with their values and interests. Considering this talent information about students may allow these natural abilities to potentially become areas of great strength. Young people at times can be challenged to focus on their ever-changing interests, with heavy weight placed on future decisions, like certifications, schooling and careers.

A strength's focus encourages organizations to become great by utilizing the each person's differences, and then build the organization around those differences (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Providing programs and opportunities to authentically develop natural talents through leadership development may further pave the way for not only a strong organization, but a strong strengths-based organization. Utilizing strengths has been associated with significantly higher levels of happiness, well-being, and fulfillment leading to a greater degree of authenticity (Linley, et. al., 2007). Strengths-focused programs and classrooms is one way to move towards a student-centered, personal instruction approach.

Furthermore, considerations of this data lead to future research recommendations. Following up with a random selection of state officer teams at the conclusion of their state officer year with reflection on the impact, utility and rigor of strengths and strengths training program may shed valuable insight. Additionally, a one-year, post survey followed by a five-year post survey could also help identify the impact and utility of the strengths component to state FFA officers. The State and National FFA Organizations should also consider these findings with regard to all leadership development programming. Are students receiving adequate information, opportunities and resources to identify, nurture and grow their talents? As reflected in the data, with over 30% of state FFA officers with talents heavy in the Executing Domain, simply providing the tools and resources for self-exploration and learning may lead to surprising results. Evaluating and realizing the talents of students and the respective domains each are categorized may also be valuable when creating curriculum and content revisions to programs. More content focused on finding solutions (talent of Restorative), exploring new information (talent of Learner), and taking ownership of projects (talent of Responsibility), for example, may actively engage more officers.

Is giving the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment a second time, perhaps at the end of the state FFA officer experience, an appropriate suggestion? Indications exist that it is likely the individual's measurements may project accurately for years, as the concept implies, one grows into their talents, developing into strengths (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Therefore, a re-test at the end of the state officer experience would most likely not be beneficial in that short time-frame. However, major life experiences may alter the results of the assessment, and some students have noted the heavy impact of the state FFA officer experience. Could this situation be appropriate exception for a test-retest of the assessment?

Caution should be applied when using these data results to populations differing from state FFA officers. However, a random sampling of FFA members utilizing the Clifton StrengthsFinder®, or similar assessment at large, could be valuable. This research could provide insight and identify if state FFA officers are truly a representative sample of talents comparatively across FFA members nationwide. Additionally, this research may also lay foundations for a greater understanding of whether programs and opportunities are nurturing and attracting a talent-diverse array of students into the organization. A random sampling of agricultural education students not in FFA may also be a valuable comparison of this data, and furthermore lead to an understanding of whether opportunities in FFA are attracting all 34 themes of talent respectively.

Moreover, while there are concerns for equal encouragement for all students, regardless of natural talent, to be involved in agriculture and the FFA, recognizing the diversity of this data sample and the inherit strengths within is impressive. Strengths provide an opportunity to nurture and grow through developing self-awareness and authentic leadership skills that can ultimately fit into the current interests of the student and any future



path that student may take. Can it be considered as potentially shedding some light on recruitment and retention throughout agricultural education and the National FFA Organization? Could strengths utilization and subsequent evaluation provide an avenue to develop the necessary soft skills that are required for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

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**CHAPTER V. ARE SELECTION PROCESSES ALLOWING STRENGTHS'  
DIVERSE MEMBERS TO MOVE THROUGH THE RANKS OF FFA?**

A paper prepared for submission to the *Journal of Agricultural Education*

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**Abstract**

*As a student-lead organization, the National FFA Organization and the selection of student leaders is an essential element of its continuation and success. As the National FFA Organization continues to strive to provide opportunities for personal growth and premier leadership, considerations to member advancement through selection criteria on the state level ultimately increases awareness of the potential end products of these criteria - - the students. Each selection component yielded the same top ten talents; Achiever, Restorative, Responsibility, Includer, Learner, Belief, Positivity, WOO, Input, and Communication. This indicated no support of a relationship between the type of selection process utilized and differentiation of those strengths. State and National FFA staff should consider and review each step in the selection process, and if these steps are truly effective at allowing diversely talented members to be authentically represented.*

**Introduction**

The heart of any organization is its' members. The National FFA Organization is a student-lead organization, an essential element of its continuation and success is the selection of student leaders. Research has shown that state FFA officer leadership programs provide the opportunity for professional and personal development while instilling a positive sense of

self and abilities (Hoover & Bruce, 2006). Additional research highlights the necessity for leadership opportunities to continue to help students understand one's self and how to interact with others (Horstmeier & Nall, 2007). As outlined by Roberts, Harder and Brashears (2016) in the 2016-2020 Agricultural Education National Research Agenda in Priority Area 3, Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce that Addresses the Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the need exists to investigate soft skill development. As the National FFA Organization continues to strive to provide opportunities for personal growth and premier leadership, considerations of member advancement through selection criteria on the state level ultimately increase awareness of potential student outcomes.

Student leader selection and impact has been no stranger to the agricultural education community. A number of articles, described below, can be found exploring the details, importance, best practices and impacts in selection of FFA leadership teams and their function. In 1978 one issue, volume 50, of *The Agricultural Education Magazine* was dedicated to FFA Leaders. One article identified that students often have a lack of confidence and keep abilities hidden or aren't able to identify their strengths, and FFA provides opportunities to discover themselves (Jensen, 1978). Another article in that same issue notes the value in identifying personality characteristics of leaders that may provide insight into the type of student leader they may become (Cox & McCormick, 1978). Jensen goes on to further discuss how difficult it is to measure and place a value on these leadership experiences (1978).

In November of 1991, another entire issue of *The Agricultural Education Magazine* was dedicated to the theme "Impact of FFA Leadership". Gartin discussed the benefit of students recognizing their own style, the strengths and weaknesses of this style, and

potentially provided insight to appreciate the strengths of others, which may lead to helping groups become more effective and more productive (1991). Various practices and tips were identified throughout this issue dedicated to FFA leadership. One article by Peters (1991) provided discussion on the importance and success of assisting students through a mentoring program, where older students or members provide support and guidance to younger ones. Types of leadership styles and their impact on students were also considered (Barrett, 1991). Further implications were noted for teachers and students to consider throughout this issue. Barrett noted how, “Helping students develop confidence and an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses as leaders will go a long way in achieving the aim of leadership development” (1991, p. 11). Woodard and Herren (1991) discussed the leadership impact of the officer team, and noted that it is necessary for advisors to help students realize the importance of being an authentic team member, willing to work and lead along with the team (1991).

Development of state FFA officers were considered in a study completed by Hoover and Bruce (2006) where they took a deeper look at the long-term consequences associated with serving as a state FFA officer in Pennsylvania. Results indicated that holding a state level FFA office engaged youth in self-exploration, discovery of strengths and weaknesses, in addition to providing an avenue to receive recognition for competence, support of positive adolescent development, transference of leadership skills, and purposeful civic and community engagement (Hoover & Bruce, 2006). Considerations to future leader development was the scope of examining National FFA officer candidate preparation where several factors were identified as important and could result in an individual’s enhancement of preparation (Hoover & Atwater, 2005).

There are various leadership assessments and tools available to utilize for leadership development. The Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> is one such tool that is a web-based assessment that measures the presence of 34 natural talents organized into themes (Clifton, Anderson & Schreiner, 2006). Figure 5.1, provides a description of all 34 themes of talent. A theme is a category of talents, which are defined as recurring and consistent patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). The intentional purpose of the assessment is to nurture personal growth through discussion with others by increasing self-awareness (Asplund, Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2009).

Figure 5.1

Talent	Definition
Achiever <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Achiever theme work hard and possess a great deal of stamina. They take immense satisfaction in being busy and productive.
Activator <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Activator theme can make things happen by turning thoughts into action. They are often impatient.
Adaptability <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Adaptability theme prefer to go with the flow. They tend to be “now” people who take things as they come and discover the future one day at a time.
Analytical <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Analytical theme search for reasons and causes. They have the ability to think about all the factors that might affect a situation.
Arranger <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Arranger theme can organize, but they also have a flexibility that complements this ability. They like to determine how all of the pieces and resources can be arranged for maximum productivity.
Belief <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Belief theme have certain core values that are unchanging. Out of these values emerges a defined purpose for their lives.
Command <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Command theme have presence. They can take control of a situation and make decisions.



## Figure 5.1 continued

Communication <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Communication theme generally find it easy to put their thoughts into words. They are good conversationalists and presenters.
Competition <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Competition theme measure their progress against the performance of others. They strive to win first place and revel in contests.
Connectedness <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Connectedness theme have faith in the links among all things. They believe there are few coincidences and that almost every event has meaning.
Consistency <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Consistency theme are keenly aware of the need to treat people the same. They try to treat everyone with equality by setting up clear rules and adhering to them.
Context <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Context theme enjoy thinking about the past. They understand the present by researching its history.
Deliberative <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Deliberative theme are best described by the serious care they take in making decisions or choices. They anticipate obstacles.
Developer <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Developer theme recognize and cultivate the potential in others. They spot the signs of each small improvement and derive satisfaction from evidence of progress.
Discipline <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Discipline theme enjoy routine and structure. Their world is best described by the order they create.
Empathy <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Empathy theme can sense other people's feelings by imagining themselves in others' lives or situations.
Focus <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Focus theme can take a direction, follow through, and make the corrections necessary to stay on track. They prioritize, then act.
Futuristic <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Futuristic theme are inspired by the future and what could be. They energize others with their visions of the future.
Harmony <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Harmony theme look for consensus. They don't enjoy conflict; rather they seek areas of agreement.

## Figure 5.1 continued

Ideation <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Ideation theme are fascinated by ideas. They are able to find connections between seemingly disparate phenomena.
Includer <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Includer theme accept others. They show awareness of those who feel left out and make an effort to include them.
Individualization <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Individualization theme are intrigued with the unique qualities of each person. They have a gift for figuring out how different people can work together productively.
Input <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Input theme have a craving to know more. Often they like to collect and archive all kinds of information.
Intellection <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Intellection theme are characterized by their intellectual activity. They are introspective and appreciate intellectual discussions.
Learner <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Learner theme have a great desire to learn and want to continuously improve. The process of learning, rather than the outcome, excites them.
Maximizer <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Maximizer the focus on strength as a way to stimulate personal and group excellence. They seek to transform something strong into something superb.
Positivity <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Positivity theme have contagious enthusiasm. They are upbeat and can get others excited about what they are going to do.
Relator <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Relator theme enjoy close relationships with others. They find deep satisfaction in working hard with friends to achieve a goal.
Responsibility <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Responsibility theme take psychological ownership of what they say they will do. They are committed to stable values such as honesty and loyalty.
Restorative <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Restorative theme are adept at dealing with problems. They are good at figuring out what is wrong and resolving it.
Self-Assurance <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Self-Assurance theme feel confident in their ability to manage their own lives. They possess an inner compass that gives them confidence that their decisions are right.

Figure 5.1 continued

Significance™	People exceptionally talented in the Significance theme want to be very important in others' eyes. They are independent and want to be recognized.
Strategic™	People exceptionally talented in the Strategic theme create alternative ways to proceed. Faced with any given scenario, they can quickly spot the relevant patterns and issues.
WOO™	People exceptionally talented in the Woo theme love the challenge of meeting new people and winning them over. They derive satisfaction from breaking the ice and making a connection with someone.

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Talent awareness leads to a greater understanding on one's abilities and potential strengths. Collaboration and cooperative learning can both benefit from strengths awareness. "Talking together about how your talents complement one another can lead to what is called 'synergy' – the tremendous result that occurs when a group of people discover and maximize their talents as a team, rather than simply contribute their talents as separate individuals" (Clifton, et al., 2006, p. 87-88).

### **Conceptual Framework**

Strengths-based leadership serves as the first piece of framework for this research. As strengths research progressed, the idea to consider how individual's strengths impacted team dynamics and effectiveness, gave way to broader groupings of strengths. From this idea, "four distinct domains of leadership strength emerged: Executing, Influencing, Relationship Building, and Strategic Thinking" (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p. 23). (See Figure, 4.2 below). The concepts behind the domains of leadership strength embraced the fact that each person is unique to their talents, and when talents were combined with team members, if spread across the domains, this usually provided a more successful team experience.

Figure 4.2, Strengths-based domains of leadership

Executing	Influencing	Relationship Building	Strategic Thinking
Achiever	Activator	Adaptability	Analytical
Arranger	Command	Developer	Context
Belief	Communication	Connectedness	Futuristic
Consistency	Competition	Empathy	Ideation
Deliberative	Maximizer	Harmony	Input
Discipline	Self-assurance	Includer	Intellection
Focus	Significance	Individualization	Learner
Responsibility	WOO	Positivity	Strategic
Restorative		Relator	

*Strengths Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow*, (Rath &

Conchie, 2008, p. 24)

“Leaders with dominant strength in the Executing domain know how to make things happen” (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p. 24). These types of people produce results, get things done and will work until the task or project is completed. “Those who lead by Influencing help their team reach a much broader audience” (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p. 25). These types of people strong in the Influencing domain will be successful in spreading the key messages and principles of the organization both inside and out. “Those who lead through Relationship Building are the essential glue that holds a team together” (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p. 25). These types of people will bring teams and efforts together, and will commonly produce a higher yield. “Leaders with great Strategic Thinking strengths are the ones who keep us all focused on what could be” (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p. 26). These types of people on a team push and stretch thinking, often leading to better team decisions and outcomes. A focus on the strengths approach is more about authenticity, not positive or negative, but truly authentic self-discovery (Welch, Grossaint, Reid, & Walker, 2014).

Authentic leadership provides the second framework of this study. Research demonstrated by Diddams and Chang (2012) discussed, “authentic leadership holds great

promise for producing effective leaders who are oriented toward the service of others” (p. 600). Luthans and Avolio (2003) outlined authentic leadership in the context of an organization as “a process that draws from both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which results in both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors on the part of leaders” (p. 243). A more prevalent, well-encompassed definition became known in 2008, as part of the authentic leadership research agenda.

Authentic leadership is a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008, p. 94).

One component, a leader’s self-awareness, has been widely agreed upon as the beginning of authentic leadership development across these variances in interpretation of authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Student leaders demonstrating true authentic leadership should begin with self-awareness of one’s abilities and skills. Avolio and Gardner’s (2005) key distinction of authentic leaders was “authentic leadership can help develop and shape a strength-based organization” (p. 334).

### **Purpose and Objectives**

Each state association in the organization evaluates and selects state level, student leaders in varying ways. Analyzing if there is a relationship in student leadership strengths compared to the type of selection tools utilized to choose state officers was the focus of this

study. The National FFA Organization provides state leaders with the opportunity, free of charge, to complete the Clifton StrengthFinder® assessment. State FFA officers also have the opportunity to complete rigorous training and curriculum. Some states actively utilize strengths development and resources throughout the year of office, while others do not utilize the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment or the program. The data from the state officers that have completed the assessment provided by the National FFA Organization has been collected since 2006, except for 2011. The data has not been analyzed and used to propel student leadership development forward.

The purpose of this study was to identify and explore self-identified talents among state FFA officers using data collected by the National FFA Organization. The first objective was to compare the top five talent themes of state FFA officers, utilizing the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment data, to the state selection process utilized to elect said officers. This objective allows taking a closer look at the spectrum of diversity in the talents of student leaders in the organization on the state level in relationship to the process utilized to elect student leaders. The second objective was to analyze state FFA officers' talents according to the strengths-based domains of leadership utilizing the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment data.

### **Methodology**

All states FFA associations are provided, free of charge, the opportunity for state FFA officers to utilize the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment. Once a student completes the assessment, the signature top five themes of talent are recorded and made available to the National FFA Organization, and if provided by participating officers or state association, the state demographic was also recorded. If sought by the student or staff, some additional

resources are available to assist the officer and association with further development and information in regards to each officers' talents. According to Clifton, et al. in *StrengthsQuest* the Clifton StrengthsFinder® is a

“Web-based talent assessment consisting of 180 item-pairs (with five response options), presented to the user over a secure connection” (p. 301). Clifton et al. further states that,

The participant is then asked to choose from a pair the statement that best describes him or her, and to the extent to which that chosen option is descriptive of him or her.

The participant is given 20 seconds to respond to each pair of items before the system moves on to the next item-pair. Upon completion, the respondent receives feedback including his or her top five themes and related action items (p. 301).

Coming to know, understand and value talents, which have the ability to develop into strengths, can lead to achieving (Clifton, et al., 2006). The Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment is based on positive psychology, and has been used in understanding individuals in a variety of situations including student, team and personal development (Asplund, et al., 2009).

Interviews administered by Gallup analysts to more than two-million individuals were reviewed and generated into data that was used to capitalize on the accumulated knowledge and experience of strengths-based practice (Asplund, et al., 2009). Currently, the assessment is available in over 20 different languages, and after a revision in 2006, these 180 items were reduced to 177 and were grouped into 34 themes, listed in Table 5.1 (Clifton, et al., 2006).

After compiling the themes, additional data was collected on the process by which state FFA officers were selected. If present, this information, which correlates to the state selection process, was also included in the analysis. The research design is that of a

convenience sample of participating state FFA officers in the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment tool, who, by a combination of the state association and the student leader, choose to participate. The data was organized in Microsoft<sup>®</sup> Excel and then analyzed using JMP for frequency and percent. In some state associations, regional officers or presidents are considered state FFA officers, and thus train together. Unfortunately, the number of total state FFA officers is not reported each year. The number is not static; therefore, the exact percent of the total population is not available to report. It should be noted that the selection process data is being analyzed for five total years, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015. The strengths-based leadership domains were being measured by the total data collection period, 2006-2010; 2012-2015. All corresponding tables note the appropriate year(s).

The Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> assessment has been vetted through aspects of validity, reliability and consistency, and the intent is to provide a broad overview of that pertinent information. Validity, specifically content validity, has shown evidence of strength in its results, as well as, deeper exploration into construct validity has shown no problem with multicollinearity (Asplund, et. al., 2009). Schreiner (2006) measured construct validity in two ways, comparing Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup> student results to the same students taking two similar inventories, the California Psychological Inventory (Gough & Bradley, 1996) and the 16PF (Cattell, 1993). “93.4% of these predictions were confirmed by significant correlation coefficients,” as well as, the “average item clustering percentage across all possible theme pairs was 90%” (Schreiner, 2006). A number of studies exist that have examined the overall usefulness of the instrument, and such evidence to strongly support positive utility is easily found across a number of outlets (Clifton & Harter, 2003; Schreiner, 2006; Bayer, 2012;



Lane & Chapman, 2011; Stebleton, Soria & Albecker, 2012; Wisner, 2011; Gillum, 2005; Lehnert, 2009).

Two types of reliability estimates were used to examine the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup>, internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha, as well as, test-retest reliability (Asplund, et al, 2009). Test-retest correlations were generally consistent; however, the reliability of the score profile is also critical, and a Chi-Square test of independence was conducted on each theme (Asplund, et al., 2009). The results of this test indicated that 33 of the 34 themes had significant results, indicating evidence of stability for those themes. However, one theme, self-assurance, was less stable over time in this particular study (Asplund, et al., 2009). Test-retest was also examined by Schreiner (2006) and performed like other similar instruments.

### **Results**

In Table 5.1, all student data, from 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015 that corresponds to the known participating states ( $N=1642$ ) that utilize a state FFA officer application as a component of the selection process, is displayed. Notably, the top ten most frequently occurring talents were: Achiever, Responsibility, Restorative, Includer, Learner, Belief, Positivity, WOO, Input and Communication.

Table 5.1

*Selection Process - State Officer Application, All participating states, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015*

Strength	<i>f</i>	%	Strength	<i>f</i>	%
Achiever	611	37.21	Arranger	213	12.97
Responsibility	529	32.22	Relator	192	11.69
Restorative	527	32.10	Context	161	9.81
Includer	492	29.96	Significance	147	8.95
Learner	437	26.61	Ideation	144	8.77
Belief	407	24.79	Focus	134	8.16
Positivity	392	23.87	Discipline	128	7.80
WOO	365	22.23	Activator	114	6.94
Input	324	19.73	Empathy	113	6.88
Communication	302	18.39	Analytical	101	6.15
Strategic	294	17.90	Consistency	94	5.72
Developer	287	17.48	Connectedness	88	5.36
Futuristic	284	17.30	Deliberative	86	5.24
Harmony	247	15.04	Self-Assurance	77	4.69
Adaptability	244	14.86	Maximizer	71	4.32
Competition	243	14.80	Intellection	69	4.20
Individualization	226	13.76	Command	67	4.08

In Table 5.2, all student data that corresponds to the known participating states ( $N=1643$ ) that utilize a state FFA officer interview as a component of the selection process is displayed. Notably, the top ten most frequently occurring talents were: Achiever, Responsibility, Restorative, Includer, Learner, Belief, Positivity, WOO, Input and Communication.

Table 5.2

*Selection Process - Interview Process, All participating states, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015*

Strength	<i>f</i>	%	Strength	<i>f</i>	%
Achiever	612	37.25	Arranger	213	12.96
Responsibility	529	32.20	Relator	192	11.69
Restorative	528	32.14	Context	161	9.80
Includer	492	29.95	Significance	147	8.95
Learner	437	26.60	Ideation	144	8.76
Belief	408	24.83	Focus	134	8.16
Positivity	392	23.86	Discipline	128	7.79
WOO	365	22.22	Activator	114	6.94
Input	324	19.72	Empathy	113	6.88
Communication	302	18.38	Analytical	101	6.15
Strategic	294	17.89	Consistency	94	5.72
Developer	287	17.47	Connectedness	88	5.36
Futuristic	285	17.35	Deliberative	86	5.23
Harmony	247	15.03	Self-Assurance	77	4.69
Adaptability	245	14.91	Maximizer	71	4.32
Competition	243	14.79	Intellection	69	4.20
Individualization	226	13.76	Command	67	4.08

In Table 5.3, all student data that corresponds to the known participating states ( $N=1058$ ) that utilize a state FFA officer slate as a component of the selection process is displayed. The top ten most frequently occurring talents were: Achiever, Responsibility, Restorative, Includer, Learner, Positivity, WOO, Belief, Input and Communication.

Table 5.3

*Selection Process, All participating states, Slate of Officers, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015*

Strength	<i>f</i>	%	Strength	<i>f</i>	%
Achiever	369	34.88	Arranger	139	13.14
Responsibility	334	31.57	Relator	121	11.44
Restorative	334	31.57	Context	109	10.30
Includer	314	29.68	Ideation	102	9.64
Learner	280	26.47	Significance	95	8.99
Positivity	261	24.67	Discipline	92	8.70
WOO	244	23.06	Focus	84	7.94
Belief	241	22.78	Empathy	79	7.47
Input	220	20.79	Activator	70	6.62
Communication	203	19.19	Analytical	67	6.33
Strategic	189	17.86	Consistency	60	5.67
Developer	187	17.67	Deliberative	53	5.01
Futuristic	186	17.58	Connectedness	51	4.82
Harmony	162	15.31	Self-Assurance	49	4.63
Competition	161	15.22	Intellection	48	4.54
Adaptability	156	14.74	Maximizer	45	4.25
Individualization	144	13.61	Command	41	3.88

In Table 5.4, all student data that corresponds to the known participating states ( $N=826$ ) that utilize a state FFA officer slate with an immediate vote to accept slate as a component of the selection process is displayed. The top ten most frequently occurring talents were: Achiever, Restorative, Responsibility, Includer, Belief, Learner, Positivity, WOO, Communication, and Input.

Table 5.4

*Selection Process - Immediate vote of accepted slate, All participating states  
2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015*

Strength	<i>f</i>	%	Strength	<i>f</i>	%
Achiever	289	34.99	Arranger	103	12.47
Restorative	282	34.14	Relator	100	12.11
Responsibility	268	32.45	Ideation	85	10.29
Includer	241	29.18	Context	82	9.93
Belief	208	25.18	Discipline	76	9.20
Learner	205	24.82	Empathy	63	7.63
Positivity	194	23.49	Significance	61	7.38
WOO	185	22.40	Activator	57	6.90
Communication	162	19.61	Focus	57	6.90
Input	159	19.25	Consistency	54	6.54
Developer	154	18.64	Analytical	49	5.93
Strategic	150	18.16	Deliberative	47	5.69
Futuristic	149	18.04	Maximizer	40	4.84
Adaptability	133	16.10	Connectedness	39	4.72
Harmony	131	15.86	Intellection	33	4.00
Competition	110	13.32	Self-Assurance	31	3.75
Individualization	105	12.71	Command	28	3.39

In Table 5.5, all student data that corresponds to the known participating states ( $N=578$ ) that utilize a popular vote per individual office for selection of state FFA officers as a component of the selection process is displayed below. The top ten most frequently occurring talents were: Achiever, Responsibility, Includer, Restorative, Learner, WOO, Belief, Positivity, Input, and Communication.

Table 5.5

*Selection Process - Popular vote per individual office, All participating states, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015*

Strength	<i>f</i>	%	Strength	<i>f</i>	%
Achiever	214	37.02	Arranger	66	11.42
Responsibility	173	29.93	Context	62	10.73
Includer	172	29.78	Significance	59	10.21
Restorative	170	29.41	Relator	56	9.69
Learner	158	27.34	Focus	47	8.13
WOO	146	25.26	Ideation	46	7.96
Belief	143	24.74	Activator	45	7.79
Positivity	137	23.70	Empathy	42	7.27
Input	115	19.90	Discipline	38	6.57
Communication	110	19.03	Analytical	36	6.23
Strategic	108	18.69	Connectedness	36	6.23
Competition	102	17.65	Self-Assurance	31	5.36
Futuristic	102	17.65	Consistency	29	5.02
Developer	96	16.61	Deliberative	28	4.84
Adaptability	87	15.05	Intellection	28	4.84
Individualization	87	15.05	Maximizer	22	3.81
Harmony	80	13.84	Command	19	3.29

In Table 5.6, all student data that corresponds to the known participating states ( $N=690$ ) that utilize on convention stage speeches and/or rounds for selection of state FFA officers as a component of the selection process is displayed below. The top ten most frequently occurring talents were: Achiever, Responsibility, Restorative, Includer, Learner, Belief, WOO, Positivity, Input, and Communication.

Table 5.6

*Selection Process - On convention stage speeches and/or rounds, All participating states, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015*

Strength	<i>f</i>	%	Strength	<i>f</i>	%
Achiever	253	36.67	Arranger	85	12.32
Responsibility	224	32.46	Relator	77	11.16
Restorative	224	32.46	Context	68	9.86
Includer	211	30.58	Significance	65	9.42
Learner	183	26.52	Ideation	56	8.12
Belief	177	25.65	Focus	52	7.54
WOO	173	25.07	Activator	51	7.39
Positivity	169	24.49	Empathy	50	7.25
Input	137	19.86	Connectedness	44	6.38
Communication	134	19.42	Analytical	41	5.94
Strategic	128	18.55	Discipline	40	5.80
Developer	127	18.41	Deliberative	35	4.07
Futuristic	108	15.65	Consistency	34	4.93
Competition	106	15.36	Self-Assurance	31	4.49
Adaptability	100	14.49	Intellection	29	4.20
Individualization	97	14.06	Command	23	3.33
Harmony	96	13.91	Maximizer	22	3.19

Throughout the entire data collection period, 2006-2010; 2012-2015, when the 3,283 state FFA officers' top five themes of talent were grouped and counted into the four leadership domains identified in strengths-based leadership, the results (Table 5.7) show the most talents placed in the executing domain at 32.87%. The influencing domain ranked in as the lowest of the re-grouped top five talents at 17.88%.

Table 5.7  
*2006-2010 and 2012-1015 Leadership Domains*

Strength	<i>f</i>	%
Executing	5395	32.87
Relationship Building	4498	27.40
Strategic Thinking	3587	21.85
Influencing	2935	17.88

### **Conclusions and Discussion**

A variety of selection process tools are utilized across the National FFA Organization's member associations. Of the 52 total state associations in the National FFA organization, this information is known to 49 of those associations. When considering these results, 48 used a state officer application, 49 used an interview process, 30 utilized a slate of state officers, 24 held an immediate vote to accept slate, 20 held some type of on convention stage speeches and/or rounds and 16 held a popular vote per officer position. It is noteworthy to explain that each state association may use any or all of these methods. While there may be additional components to each individual association's selection process, these are the most easily and commonly identified and grouped components.

While there is a variance in the number of associations that utilize these processes, each component yielded the same top ten talents; Achiever, Restorative, Responsibility, Includer, Learner, Belief, Positivity, WOO, Input, and Communication. As we look from



state association to state association, slight variations can be seen across the most commonly occurring talents ranked within the top 10. However, these results would indicate no relationship between the type of selection process utilized and differentiation of those strengths.

As grouped talents, the domains provide another perspective on these results. Individual state FFA officer strengths collected together and grouped in these domains stir some additional thoughts and questions. The Executing domain provides further information as to how these particular top talent themes work together to potentially benefit the organization. The culture of state officers often reflect this domain, working relentlessly to make things happen. The Influencing domain obviously weighs in as the least prevalent grouping. What does this mean to the organization? The heart of the state FFA officer concept is rooted in the peer leadership model of state FFA officers providing a conduit to the greater membership at large. While the Influencing talents of state FFA officers in this sample are less frequently measured in the top five themes, it does not definitively mean this is an area of non-talent. Areas of non-talent could only be identified by knowing the entire ranked 34 themes of each officer. Theoretically, for example, what if many of these themes were ranked sixth or seventh? With investment into knowledge and skill, a talent theme can become a true strength. Through the strengths-based leadership framework, considerations should be given to the content of leadership development programming and opportunities.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Potential state officer candidates and those involved with student leader selection alike can benefit from this research. Agricultural education teachers and FFA staff at all levels should consider the type of selection process component utilized and the pattern of

talents shared across state FFA officers. Does the selection processes utilized for selection of state FFA officers provide for all talents to move through the ranks of FFA leadership? Does the selection processes utilized provide the opportunity to showcase strengths other than these top ten talents? Providing opportunities throughout the selection process for students to authentically express their talents could be the beginning of building a strengths-based organization. With no differentiation of talents across these selection components, is that truly being accomplished?

As reflected in the data, with over 30% of state FFA officers whose talents are heavy in the Executing Domain, simply providing the tools and resources for self-exploration and learning may lead to surprising results. Evaluating and realizing the talents of students and how the respective domains of each are categorized may also be valuable when creating curriculum and content revisions to programs. For example, more content focused on finding solutions (talent of Restorative), exploring new information (talent of Learner), and taking ownership of projects (talent of Responsibility) may actively engage more officers and students in their own development.

Since the Executing strengths-based leadership domains are more prolific in this data sample, do themes like Achiever and Responsibility inherently nurture and attract this theme in other members and students? Gartin (1991) discussed the benefit of students recognizing their own style, the strengths and weaknesses of this style, and potentially provided insight to appreciate the strengths of others, which may lead to helping groups become more effective and more productive. Can this also lead to consideration if a relationship exists between the talents of current state FFA officers in relation to the selection of new state FFA officers? How might these frequently occurring themes impact others?

Is it possible to also consider that being a state FFA officer best fits students with a core set of talents? Further research may be warranted to discover the diversity of talents across all students seeking the opportunity to be a state FFA officer versus those that are selected. This may provide additional insight into the talent diversity of the state officer candidate pool. Keeping the strengths philosophy in mind, it is important to emphasize the difference between the concept of selecting based on certain strengths versus a process that provides for a diversity of strengths to progress. The latter of those ultimately serves as the intended outcome of examining these processes, striving for an unbiased selection process.

As the National FFA Organization continues to embody and uphold the peer leader model, how will strengths, these selection processes, and leadership domains fit into that model? Investigating this soft skill development and preparedness provides insight into programs like strengths. State and National FFA staff should consider and review each step in the selection process, and whether these steps are truly effective at allowing diversely talented members to be authentically represented. As an organization that can and should benefit from a strengths-based leadership perspective, it does not begin with the strengths assessment and subsequent programs. Regardless of the strength a potential officer candidate possesses, from the talent as an Achiever or in the talent of Command, each and every student should be afforded equal opportunity in selection. Arguably, a truly strengths-based organization begins with how students are selected and progress through the ranks of leadership in FFA, while authentically representing themselves.

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## **CHAPTER VI. MAJOR FINDINGS, GENERAL CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Major Findings**

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this thesis study was to identify and analyze self-identified talents among state FFA officers spanning nearly a decade of student leaders with data collected from the National FFA Organization through the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment. This was accomplished through three specific objectives.

#### **Objective One**

This objective sought to analyze the talent diversity among the sample of state FFA officers as identified by the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment. Achiever and Responsibility were the two most frequently shared talents across state FFA officers. Achiever occurred 1,209 times in 3,283 state FFA officers at 36.83%. Responsibility occurred 1,056 times in 3,283 state FFA officers at 32.17%. Command and Intellection were located at the bottom of the talent frequencies, occurring 162 times at 4.93% and 137 times at 4.17% respectively. Achiever, Responsibility, Restorative, Includer, and Learner were of the most frequently shared talents among state FFA officers from 2006-2010, 2012-2015. However, across all years, eight of the ten most commonly shared talents were consistently ranked in the top ten annually. Achiever, Responsibility, Restorative, Includer, Belief, Positivity, WOO and Learner were of the most consistently shared in the top ten each year among state FFA officers from 2006-2010, 2012-2015. It should also be noted that all 34 talent themes occurred in the data sample of officers.

**Objective Two**

All students and respective themes from 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015, that corresponds to the known participating states which utilize a state FFA officer application, interview, slate of officers, immediate vote of state officer slate, popular vote by individual officer, and on convention stage rounds and/or speeches as a component of the selection process, noted the same top ten most frequently occurring talents: Achiever, Responsibility, Restorative, Includer, Learner, Belief, Positivity, WOO, Input and Communication.

**Objective Three**

Throughout the entire data collection period, 2006-2010; 2012-2015, when the 3,283 state FFA officers' top five themes of talent were grouped and counted into the four leadership domains identified in strengths-based leadership, the results showed the most talents placed in the Executing domain at 32.87%. The Influencing domain ranked in as the lowest of the grouped, top five talents at 17.88%.

**General Conclusions****State FFA officer talents**

State FFA officers are members who have sought out the opportunity to serve the organization in the capacity of a peer, student leader and are diverse in talents. Their talents are the most important raw material for strength building (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). A state officer with the talent of Achiever will relentlessly seek accomplishments, facing challenge after challenge. Embracing the drive in state officers with this talent could find a positive impact in the organization, the agricultural classroom and society. The Responsibility theme stirs the need to take ownership. This sense of ownership marries quite well with the Achiever theme and further leads to the reputation of state FFA officers who



not only are driven to accomplish whatever is at hand, but also have the sense of responsibility to see that the task is done well. The FFA touts a need for a high sense of responsibility in young people throughout agriculture, attracting a high number of state FFA officers with a natural talent of responsibility supporting this relationship. State FFA officers with the talent of Restorative can find potential impact when examining challenges and seeking solutions for these challenges whether in the organization, the classroom, in relationships or in agriculture. The potential challenges that lie ahead in food and agriculture can be overwhelming at times, yet may be embraced by those individuals high in the Restorative theme. State FFA officers can utilize the talent of Includer to support and encourage younger members in the organization, and draw new ones to the table. Inclusiveness can promote a welcoming environment that nurtures participation and engagement. As demographics of the nation continue to change, appreciation for the talent of Includer in the National FFA Organization among student leaders will potentially have an impact on current members as well as those who may consider joining the organization. As agriculture is an ever-evolving field, those with the natural talent of a Learner would tend to be drawn to agriculture by its nature. Serving as a state FFA officer can offer a steep learning curve to many, finding a high number of state FFA officers naturally talented in this ability could support this relationship. This love of learning will potentially transcend to future endeavors, a continued desire to learn more, in career skills and technical training, in post-secondary education, graduate courses, and/or adult education programs. The Belief theme indicates strong core values, these values shape everything one does, and quite frankly why they do it. The FFA has strong traditions and foundations, which could speak to why so many young people with this theme are drawn to the organization. The Positivity theme is about

seeing the up side of each situation, this theme can have a contagious nature, and state FFA officers with this talent can impact a number of other members whom they encounter throughout their experience. Recognizing students with this talent and approaching experiences in school and in life can be impacted with a positive perspective. Individuals strong in the WOO talent are energized from meeting new people, continually seeking opportunities to do it over and over again. This is a useful talent to have as a state FFA officer, since a large part of responsibilities include meeting new people both in and out of the organization. The five least commonly occurring strengths in state FFA officers across this data period is Deliberative, Analytical, Connectedness, Command and Intellection. A key task in these years is learning about yourself, becoming more self-aware, and recognizing the areas of greatest potential strengths or lack thereof (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006).

### **Authentic leadership development**

Notably, all 34 themes of talent are represented across the 3,283 state FFA officers represented in this data, ranging from 4.17% to 36.83% in the top 5 themes. Embracing the complex facets of each talent encountered could be a huge step in embracing a greater self-awareness of individual students and the organization. Authentic leadership promotes a nurturing environment towards greater self-awareness, internalization of moral perspectives, balanced processing and relational transparency ultimately advancing positive self-development (Walumbwa, et al., 2008). Furthermore, objectively considering how talents can grow into strengths and honestly recognizing non-strengths could be considered a component of internalization and balanced processing. Relational transparency can build from learning about teammates' strengths and considering others' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors about

these strengths, as well as their own. Potentially each of these steps in authentic leadership development could find a parallel in state FFA officer strengths development.

### **State FFA officer selection processes**

Each selection component yielded the same top ten talents: Achiever, Restorative, Responsibility, Includer, Learner, Belief, Positivity, WOO, Input, and Communication. Indications of no relationship between the type of selection process utilized and differentiation of those strengths would be inferred. Strong considerations should be afforded to the components being utilized in selection and the subsequent evaluation of students participating in that process. Is serving as a state FFA officer appropriate for a specific set of talents, or are all students and their natural talents appropriate for this opportunity?

### **Strength-based leadership domains**

The culture and stereotypes of state officers often reflect the Executing domain, working relentlessly to make things happen. The Influencing domain weighs in as the least prevalent grouping. The Executing domain talents may need balanced with other talents to stay purposed. The heart of the state FFA officer concept is rooted in the peer leadership model of state FFA officers providing a conduit to the greater membership at large. While the Influencing talents of state FFA officers in this sample are less frequently measured in the top five themes, it does not definitively mean this is an area of non-talent. With investment into knowledge and skill, a talent theme can become a true strength. Influencing domain talents may need to be an area of focus for state officer leadership development programs. Strong teams have several things in common, including; teams' focus on results, giving

priority to what's best for the organization, committing to their work; embracing diversity; and attracting talent (Rath & Conchie, 2008).

### **General Implications & Recommendations**

#### **State FFA officer talents**

As the National FFA Organization continues to embody and uphold the peer leader model, important considerations on how strengths, these selection processes, and leadership domains will fit into that model. State and National FFA Staff should consider evaluation of talent and strengths programs in regard to delivery, content and evaluation of the program. Additionally, state FFA officers, National FFA Officers, and student facilitators, as they deliver student programs, may all be impacted by student talents and strengths. Following up with a random selection of state officer teams at the conclusion of their state officer year with reflection on the impact, utility and rigor of strengths and strengths training program, may shed valuable insight. Additionally, a one-year, post survey followed by a five-year post survey, could also help identify the impact and utility of the strengths component to state FFA officers. The State and National FFA Organizations should also consider these findings with regard to all leadership development programming. Are students receiving adequate information, opportunities and resources to identify, nurture and grow their talents? As reflected in the data, with over 30% of state FFA officers with talents heavy in the Executing Domain, simply providing the tools and resources for self-exploration and learning may lead to surprising results. Evaluating and realizing the talents of students and how the respective domains are categorized may also be valuable when creating curriculum and content revisions to programs. More content focused on finding solutions (talent of Restorative),

exploring new information (talent of Learner), and taking ownership of projects (talent of Responsibility), for example, may actively engage more officers.

Since the Executing strengths-based leadership domain is more prolific in this data sample, do themes like Achiever and Responsibility inherently nurture and attract this theme in other members and students? Further research may be needed to examine if a relationship exists between current state officer talents and those being evaluated and selected for the subsequent year of service. Additional research may be useful for discovering the diversity of talents across all students seeking the opportunity to be a state FFA officer versus those that are selected. This may provide additional insight into the talent diversity of the state officer candidate pool.

Furthermore, while the this data was not originally collected for the purpose of research, the National FFA Organization should consider being purposed in future data collection of state FFA officer strengths. Collecting additional demographic and personal information (i.e., gender, officer position, repeat officer, ethnicity, future plans, etc.) may provide another avenue for future research and insight.

### **Authentic Leadership Development**

Providing programs and opportunities to authentically develop natural talents through leadership development may further pave the way for not only a strong organization, but a strong strengths-based organization. Strengths-focused programs and classrooms is one way to move towards a student-centered, personal instruction approach. What are the benefits of strengths training and development for state FFA officers? How do state FFA officers evaluate current strengths training and development? A random sampling of FFA members utilizing the Clifton StrengthsFinder<sup>®</sup>, or similar assessment at large, could be valuable. This

could identify if state FFA officers are truly a representative sample of talents comparatively across FFA members nationwide. Additionally, this research may also lay foundations for a greater understanding of whether programs and opportunities are nurturing and attracting a talent-diverse array of students into the organization. A random sampling of agricultural education students not in FFA may also be a valuable comparison of this data and furthermore lead to an understanding of whether opportunities in FFA are attracting all 34 themes of talent respectively. Strengths provide an opportunity to nurture and grow through developing self-awareness and authentic leadership skills that can ultimately fit into the current interests of the student and any future path that student may take. This future data could be considered as having potential to shed some light on recruitment and retention practices throughout agricultural education and the National FFA Organization. Strengths utilization and subsequent evaluation could provide one approach to develop the necessary soft skills that are required for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### **State FFA officer selection processes**

Potential state officer candidates and those involved with student leader selection alike can benefit from this research. Providing opportunities throughout the selection process for students to authentically express their talents could be the beginning of building a strengths-based organization. State and National FFA staff should consider and review each step in the selection process, and determine if these steps are truly effective at allowing diversely talented members to be authentically represented. The execution, purpose and evaluation components of leader selection should all be evaluated. As an organization that can and should benefit from a strengths-based leadership perspective, it doesn't begin with the strengths assessment and subsequent programs. Regardless of the strength a potential

officer candidate possesses, from the talent as an Achiever or in the talent of Command, each and every student should be afforded equal opportunity in selection. A truly strengths-based organization begins with how students are selected and progress through the ranks of leadership in FFA while authentically representing themselves.

### **Strengths-based leadership domains**

The concept behind strengths-based leadership is to increase the effectiveness and impact of teams and organizations in addition to the well-being of the individual. For individuals serving on a team to those managing a team, productivity and effectiveness is sought by both parties in addition to the group or organization the team is serving. The Influencing domain is notably the weakest in terms of talent representation, but is essential to student lead organizations like the National FFA Organization. Providing adequate opportunities for students to invest learning knowledge and practice these skills could potentially pull the natural talents contained within the Influencing domain more readily into practice. Researching and analyzing deeper into the selection processes and evaluating if students are given the opportunity to authentically showcase the talents of the Influencing domain may also provide the necessary information to evaluate the weak representation of this domain among state FFA officers in this data sample. Ultimately, this may lead to awareness of strengths-based domains and the impact these domains may have on each of the areas listed above.

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## Appendix A

Figure A1

### Clifton StrengthsFinder® Talents

Talent	Definition
Achiever®	People exceptionally talented in the Achiever theme work hard and possess a great deal of stamina. They take immense satisfaction in being busy and productive.
Activator®	People exceptionally talented in the Activator theme can make things happen by turning thoughts into action. They are often impatient.
Adaptability®	People exceptionally talented in the Adaptability theme prefer to go with the flow. They tend to be “now” people who take things as they come and discover the future one day at a time.
Analytical®	People exceptionally talented in the Analytical theme search for reasons and causes. They have the ability to think about all the factors that might affect a situation.
Arranger™	People exceptionally talented in the Arranger theme can organize, but they also have a flexibility that complements this ability. They like to determine how all of the pieces and resources can be arranged for maximum productivity.
Belief®	People exceptionally talented in the Belief theme have certain core values that are unchanging. Out of these values emerges a defined purpose for their lives.
Command®	People exceptionally talented in the Command theme have presence. They can take control of a situation and make decisions.
Communication®	People exceptionally talented in the Communication theme generally find it easy to put their thoughts into words. They are good conversationalists and presenters.
Competition®	People exceptionally talented in the Competition theme measure their progress against the performance of others. They strive to win first place and revel in contests.
Connectedness®	People exceptionally talented in the Connectedness theme have faith in the links among all things. They believe there are few coincidences and that almost every event has meaning.

## Figure A1 continued

Consistency™	People exceptionally talented in the Consistency theme are keenly aware of the need to treat people the same. They try to treat everyone with equality by setting up clear rules and adhering to them.
Context®	People exceptionally talented in the Context theme enjoy thinking about the past. They understand the present by researching its history.
Deliberative™	People exceptionally talented in the Deliberative theme are best described by the serious care they take in making decisions or choices. They anticipate obstacles.
Developer®	People exceptionally talented in the Developer theme recognize and cultivate the potential in others. They spot the signs of each small improvement and derive satisfaction from evidence of progress.
Discipline™	People exceptionally talented in the Discipline theme enjoy routine and structure. Their world is best described by the order they create.
Empathy™	People exceptionally talented in the Empathy theme can sense other people's feelings by imagining themselves in others' lives or situations.
Focus™	People exceptionally talented in the Focus theme can take a direction, follow through, and make the corrections necessary to stay on track. They prioritize, then act.
Futuristic®	People exceptionally talented in the Futuristic theme are inspired by the future and what could be. They energize others with their visions of the future.
Harmony®	People exceptionally talented in the Harmony theme look for consensus. They don't enjoy conflict; rather they seek areas of agreement.
Ideation®	People exceptionally talented in the Ideation theme are fascinated by ideas. They are able to find connections between seemingly disparate phenomena.
Includer®	People exceptionally talented in the Includer theme accept others. They show awareness of those who feel left out and make an effort to include them.
Individualization®	People exceptionally talented in the Individualization theme are intrigued with the unique qualities of each person. They have a gift for figuring out how different people can work together productively.
Input®	People exceptionally talented in the Input theme have a craving to know more. Often they like to collect and archive all kinds of information.

## Figure A1 continued

Intellection <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Intellection theme are characterized by their intellectual activity. They are introspective and appreciate intellectual discussions.
Learner <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Learner theme have a great desire to learn and want to continuously improve. The process of learning, rather than the outcome, excites them.
Maximizer <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Maximizer the focus on strength as a way to stimulate personal and group excellence. They seek to transform something strong into something superb.
Positivity <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Positivity theme have contagious enthusiasm. They are upbeat and can get others excited about what they are going to do.
Relator <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Relator theme enjoy close relationships with others. They find deep satisfaction in working hard with friends to achieve a goal.
Responsibility <sup>®</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Responsibility theme take psychological ownership of what they say they will do. They are committed to stable values such as honesty and loyalty.
Restorative <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Restorative theme are adept at dealing with problems. They are good at figuring out what is wrong and resolving it.
Self-Assurance <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Self-Assurance theme feel confident in their ability to manage their own lives. They possess an inner compass that gives them confidence that their decisions are right.
Significance <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Significance theme want to be very important in others' eyes. They are independent and want to be recognized.
Strategic <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Strategic theme create alternative ways to proceed. Faced with any given scenario, they can quickly spot the relevant patterns and issues.
WOO <sup>™</sup>	People exceptionally talented in the Woo theme love the challenge of meeting new people and winning them over. They derive satisfaction from breaking the ice and making a connection with someone.

**Appendix B**

Figure B1

Strengths-based leadership domains

Executing	Influencing	Relationship Building	Strategic Thinking
Achiever	Activator	Adaptability	Analytical
Arranger	Command	Developer	Context
Belief	Communication	Connectedness	Futuristic
Consistency	Competition	Empathy	Ideation
Deliberative	Maximizer	Harmony	Input
Discipline	Self-assurance	Includer	Intellecion
Focus	Significance	Individualization	Learner
Responsibility	WOO	Positivity	Strategic
Restorative		Relator	

*Strengths Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow*, (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p. 24)

## Appendix C

### Memorandum of Understanding Between National FFA Organization and Iowa State University

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This Agreement made and entered into this 29<sup>th</sup> day of July, 2015, between the National FFA Organization, after this called "FFA", and Iowa State University after this called "ISU" for the utilization of Strengthsfinder<sup>®</sup> data resources in the research of leadership and FFA member results.

The purpose of ISU research is to explore trends in the Strengthsfinder<sup>®</sup> data and consider broader impacts of these trends.

The National FFA Organization is dedicated to making a positive difference in the lives of students by developing their potential for premier leadership, personal growth and career success through agricultural education.

In consideration of the mutual arrangement reached herein, the parties agree with the following terms and conditions:

#### TERMS AND CONDITIONS

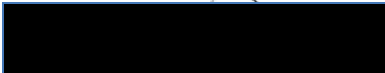
1. FFA maintains all intellectual property rights for the Strengthsfinder<sup>®</sup> data, resources and methodology.
2. FFA warrants that the Strengthsfinder<sup>®</sup> assessment was provided to officers and was instructed as outlined by the Gallup organization.
3. ISU agrees to use the data in an aggregate capacity, without identifying students by name or state, and only for the purposes outlined in this agreement.

ISU and the FFA points-of-contact regarding this agreement are as follows:

FFA: Christine White  
Division Director  
Educational Programs  
National FFA Organization  
6060 FFA Drive  
Indianapolis, Indiana 46268-0960  
Phone: (317) 802-6060 x 4212  
FAX: (317) 802-5212  
Email: cwhite@ffa.org

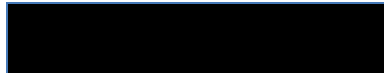
ISU: Ryan Anderson, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Agricultural Education and Studies  
Iowa State University  
206 Curtiss Hall  
Ames, IA 50111  
Phone: (515) 294-4139  
e-mail: randrsn@iastate.edu

This instrument is the entire Agreement of the parties related to the subject matter and shall supersede any prior oral or written agreements or understandings. No further modification of this instrument shall be effective unless in writing and signed by duly authorized representatives of each party.



Christine White, Division Director  
Educational Programs  
National FFA Organization

8/25/15



Ryan Anderson, Assistant Professor  
Department of Agricultural Education and  
Studies  
Iowa State University

## Appendix D



### REQUEST FOR STATE STAFF CONTACT INFORMATION FOR THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

*No other use of the National FFA list is permitted other than the specific research noted in this request submission. Any other use of the list would constitute an unauthorized use of National FFA intellectual property which would result in possible legal action and refusal of future requests from the individual and/or institution.*

**DATE** [March 1, 2016

**REQUESTOR'S NAME** Denise Mills

**GRADUATE COMMITTEE** Dr. Ryan Anderson, Dr. Robert Martin, Dr. Tom Paulsen

**CHAIR NAME (IF APPLICABLE)**

**COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY MAILING ADDRESS** 211 Curtiss Hall, Ames, Iowa 50011

**EMAIL ADDRESS** dmmills@iastate.edu

**PHONE NUMBER** 952-412-7272

**PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH STUDY** Trends in state FFA officer StrengthsFinder themes

**ANTICIPATED RESEARCH PUBLISH DATE** Summer 2016

**ANTICIPATED DATES OF CONTACTS QUESTIONNAIRE SOFTWARE** March 7-25<sup>th</sup>, 2016

**List Specifications:** Please describe the parameters you require for your sample (specific states, geographical representation, gender, type of program, etc).

Access to all state FFA staff.

Please attach a copy of your research proposal or IRB submission, research instrument, and an anticipated timeline for contacts with participants. These items may be sent to Christine White (cwhite@ffa.org). Please allow 1-2 weeks for notification.

## Appendix E

### Sample email communication to State FFA Staff

Dear State Staff,

Greetings! As an agricultural education graduate student at Iowa State University, a former state and national FFA staffer and a Blast-Off facilitator - my passion for agriculture, agricultural education, the FFA organization and leadership runs deep. In an effort to be respectful of your time and busy schedule, as part of my research thesis (which is described in more detail below) I am requesting to collect some quick information on each state association's state officer selection process as only a point of reference in the study.

If interested, the research thesis is based on the existing StrengthsFinder state officer data set, property of the National FFA Organization. This StrengthsFinder assessment began being utilized in 2006 as an opt-in component of the Blast-Off curriculum. This nearly 10-year data set has yet to be examined and reflected upon to reap the benefits of this information. In an agreement with National FFA and Iowa State University, examining this data for general trends as well as if trends of strengths exist across types of state selection processes will encompass the scope of research at this time.

The type of information being requested is to help categorize each state's, state officer selection process, examples include an application process, an interview process, a slate of officers, on-stage speeches or rounds and/or popular elections. This type of information along with any notable dates the process was changed, altered or adjusted over the past 10 years. The data can easily be entered at the following link: [https://iastate.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\\_24s8XDwXSarhVeR](https://iastate.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_24s8XDwXSarhVeR) and is designed to take approximately 5 minutes of your time, with completion by March, 25th.

Please feel free to reach out with any questions. I appreciate your time and the work you do daily! I look forward to helping build the body of research about FFA and agricultural education.

Sincerely,

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*Denise Mills  
Graduate Student  
Agricultural Education and Studies  
Iowa State University*



**Appendix F**

Figure F1

Selection Process Data from collected from State Associations, Spring 2016

State	State Officer Application (A)	Interview Process (B)	Slate of Officers [C]	Immediate vote of accepted slate (D)	Popular vote per individual office (E)	On convention stage speeches and/or rounds (F)
Alabama	A	B	C	D		
Alaska						
Arizona	A	B	C	D		F
Arkansas	A	B	C		E	F
California	A	B	C		E	F
Colorado	A	B				
Connecticut	A	B	C			
Delaware	A	B	C	D		F
Florida	A	B	C	D	E	F
Georgia	A	B				F
Hawaii	A	B			E	F
Idaho	A	B				
Illinois	A	B			E	F
Indiana	A	B	C	D		
Iowa	A	B	C		E	F
Kansas	A	B	C		E	F
Kentucky	A	B	C	D		
Louisiana	A	B	C		E	
Maine						
Maryland	A	B	C	D		
Massachusetts	A	B	C	D		
Michigan	A	B	C		E	F
Minnesota	A	B		D		
Mississippi	A	B	C	D		F
Missouri	A	B	C	D		
Montana	A	B	C	D		
Nebraska	A	B				
Nevada	A	B	C			
New Hampshire	A	B	C	D		
New Jersey	A	B	C	D		
New Mexico	A	B			E	F

Figure F1 continued

	State Officer Application (A)	Interview Process (B)	Slate of Officers [C]	Immediate vote of accepted slate (D)	Popular vote per individual office (E)	On convention stage speeches and/or rounds (F)
New York	A	B	C	D		
North Carolina	A	B	C	D		
North Dakota	A	B			E	F
Ohio	A	B	C		E	F
Oklahoma	A	B			E	F
Oregon	A	B	C		E	F
Pennsylvania	A	B	C	D		
Rhode Island	A	B	C	D		
South Carolina	A	B				F
South Dakota	A	B		D		
Tennessee	A	B		D		
Texas	A	B			E	F
Utah	A	B	C	D		
Vermont	A	B		D		
Virginia	A	B	C	D		
Washington	A	B			E	F
West Virginia						
Wisconsin	A	B				
Wyoming	A	B		D		
Puerto Rico						
Virgin Islands		B				
Total	47	48	29	24	16	20