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Understanding Students as Followers: Discovering the Influence of Followership Style on Self-Directed Learning

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Abstract

The leader has typically been the myopic center of studies involving leadership on the collegiate level. However, that does not give a holistic picture of leadership as a phenomenon. Understanding the relational, influential, and often-reciprocal roles of followers, known as followership, is essential in reaching organizational goals. Understanding the relationship between followership and learning will aid the leader in creating effective followers. The purpose of this study was to assess undergraduate students' levels of followership and self-directed learning in agricultural leadership courses at Texas A&M University. Of the respondents (n = 166), followership styles indicated students were more engaged, but less likely to be critical thinkers and the less self-directed students were more likely to be dependent followers with less critical thinking capacity. Faculty who not only understand their students as learners and followers but utilize strategies to improve their students' learning can produce followers who will have a positive impact on agricultural organizations.

Key words: followership, self-directed learning, leadership, critical thinking, engagement

College instructors have the potential to positively impact students every time they engage them inside and outside the classroom. While most instructors do not see themselves as leaders, the fact they are influencing students toward a common goal (learning, and becoming an engaged citizen) by definition makes them a leader (Northouse, 2013). This aspect of leadership for teachers also makes their students followers. Mcfarlane (2011) studied 18,000 full professors and concluded professors are not only intellectual leaders in the classroom, they are mentors and guides for their followers, or their students, outside of the classroom as well. Research, in and out of the discipline of agricultural education, has primarily focused on the leadership aspect of both instructor and student (Collinson, 2006; Cummins, 1995; Foreman & Retallick, 2012; Greiman, 2009; Strong, Wynn, Irby, & Lindner, 2013) and has neglected the verity that followership is an important aspect of the leadership phenomenon. In fact, there has been recent literature (Crossman & Crossman, 2011; Raffo, 2013), which challenges the leader-centric research that tends to negate the issue of followership. Brown and Thornborrow (2008) stated, "followership is the natural complement of leadership, and if an organization is to be successful then it must pay attention to the nature and quality of its followers as well as its leaders" (p. 5).

Higher education is a unique environment that poses its own set of challenges in leadership and followership. Leading in academia has been seen as a challenge on all levels, specifically with the professor battling the "sage on the stage" leadership notion (Rosovsky, 1990;

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Williams, Blackwell, & Bailey, 2010). Studying leadership and followership in the context of veterinary medicine, Osborne (2011) concluded less emphasis must be placed on the impact factors of leaders in higher education, and more research emphasis needs to rest on the idea of identifying followership levels among faculty and students then training leaders how to work with different types of followers. Collinson (2006) found self-preoccupations of leaders cloud faculty's ability to actively engage with different types of followers.

Followership is a complex phenomenon, which has multiple definitions and differing opinions. Often, the definition of followership is constructed in terms relating to the leader in the study or the organization as a whole. The term "follower" is often accompanied by negative connotations. "Our society incorrectly stereotypes followers in a condescending manner as docile, passive, obedient, conformists, indifferent, weak, dependent, unthinking, failures, and helpless" (Raffo, 2013, p. 263). When in fact, effective followership is a large part of successful organizations and successful leaders (Kellerman, 2008). To place this into an educational context, for learning objectives to be reached, the students must be actively engaged in the process, not just receptacles of knowledge.

How followers self-identify their role in a leader/follower situation was studied by Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, and McGregor (2010). They found context, specifically organizational climate, has the greatest influence on their ability to gauge their passive vs. active role as a follower. The more bureaucratic the organization, the less likely they will self-identify as an active follower. What this means for the organization is as the bureaucratic layers of an organization increase, followers are less likely to engage in critical thinking and active participation with the leader; thus leading to less effective organizations. Hoption, Christie, and Barling (2012) found leader's actions towards followers also have an impact on follower engagement. By giving followers challenging tasks and providing support for the followers while they are performing the task, self-identified engagement increased.

Two key elements of active and engaged followers are self-motivation and critical thinking. Stedman (2009) found that in order for students to be best prepared for future leadership opportunities, critical thinking should be emphasized in the classroom setting "The goal of every teacher is to develop their students' understanding of the content being taught in the class, as well as to assist them in their development to become independent and thoughtful problem solvers" (Myers & Dyer, 2006, p. 43). Critical thinking is an integral part of both followership and self-directed learning. Burbach, Matkin, Quinn, and Searle (2012) studied the effect agricultural faculty can have on students' critical thinking development. They found faculty who utilized teaching methods, which engaged students in higher-order thinking, had students who significantly increased their critical thinking dispositions. Self-directed learning includes critical thinking as well as active engagement on the part of the learner (Strong et al., 2013). Numerous studies have also shown the influence of a faculty member on a students' self-directed learning style as well as the learning transition between stages that occurs (Grow, 1991; Shokar, Shokar, Romero, & Bulik, 2002; Stafford, Boyd, & Lindner, 2003; Strong et al., 2013).

The *National Research Agenda* for AAAE recommends six overarching research priority areas for association members and the professional as a whole. Priority 3 indicated agricultural education faculty should develop strategies that prepare students to become professionals who demonstrate interpersonal skills (Doerfert, 2011). Priority 4 suggested faculty should examine the role of diverse perspectives in meaningful learning environments (Doerfert, 2011). This study was conducted to develop a deeper understanding of agricultural leadership students' followership styles, to add to the literature in agricultural education, and to address recommendations in our *National Research Agenda*.

Theoretical Framework

Kelly's (2008) model of followership and Grow's (1991) model of self-directed learning were used to frame this study. Kelly (2008) postulated there are two dimensions that describe how people follow: critical thinking and engagement. A follower can be anywhere on a continuum of dependent, uncritical thinking to independent, critical thinking and passive organizational engagement to active organizational engagement (see Figure 1).

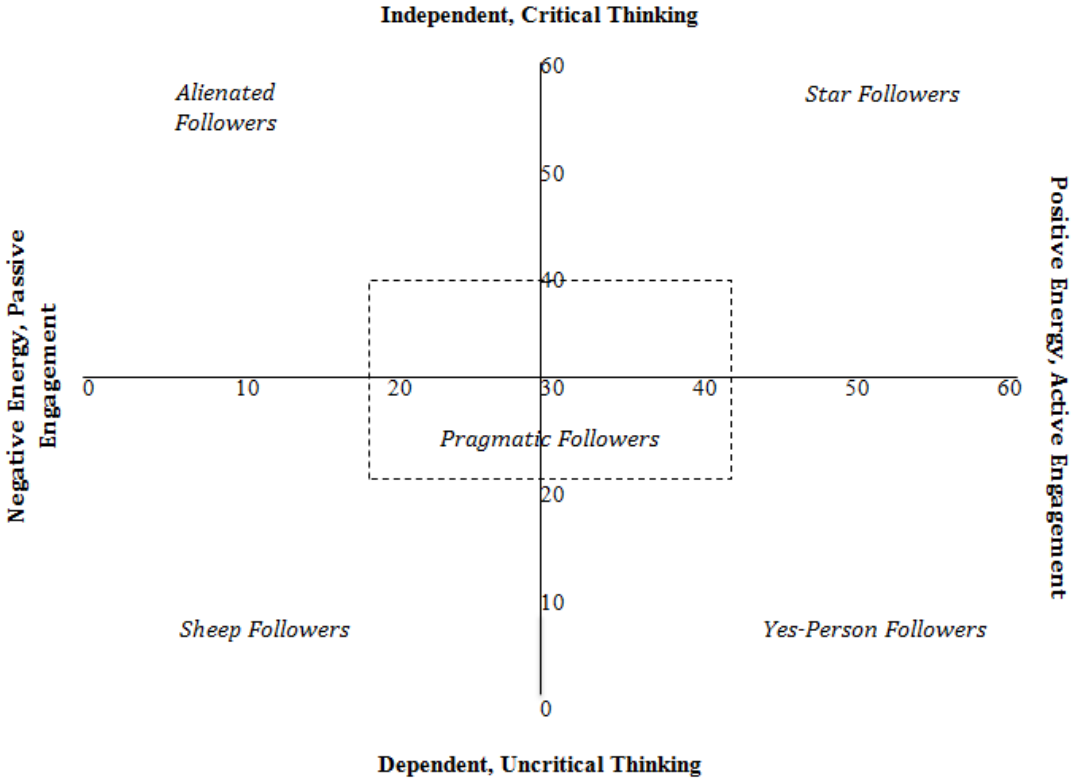

Figure 1. Kelly's (2008) model of followership

Kelly (2008) described five types of followership styles based on their position in each dimension. The "sheep" follower types are classified as dependent, uncritical and passively engaged in the organization. Sheep "look to the leader to do the thinking for them and to motivate them" (Kelly, 2008, p. 7). The "yes-person" followers are dependent and uncritical thinkers but are actively engaged in the organization. These followers look to the leader to come up with the ideas, but are very positive about carrying out whatever the leader decides. The "alienated" followers are independent and critical in their thinking but are passive in the organization. These followers tend to see the negative aspects of every organizational decision and sometimes "see themselves as the mavericks, the only people in the organization who have the guts to stand up to the boss" (Kelly, 2008, p. 7). The "pragmatics" fall into the middle of the model. They are moderate on both critical thinking and organizational engagement. They are never the first to initiate a new idea, but when the leader has a new direction, they are likely to follow. This sometimes makes them appear to be unapologetically neutral. The last category is the "star" follower. Being both independent, critical thinkers who are actively engaged in the organization, these followers are often seen as the 'go-to-person.' They are the followers who work with the leader to make an organization better. Star followers "do not accept the leader's decision without their own independent evaluation of its soundness" (Kelly, 2008, p. 8).

The more leaders know and understand about their followers, the stronger the organization (Crossman & Crossman, 2011). Empirical research on followership, specifically studies utilizing Kelly's (2008) model of followership, is in its infancy. Two research studies have tried to validate Kelly's (2008) followership model, but have had mixed findings (Blanchard, Welbourne, Gilmore, & Bullock, 2009; Thompson & Vecchio, 2009). The empirical studies conducted on followership have focused on for-profit business or high-level leaders and the reciprocal relationship with followers and their specific attributes. This study will add to the empirical knowledge of followership and how it connects to learning.

The second theory used to scaffold this study was Grow's (1991) self-directed learning. Grow (1991) developed the staged self-directed learning model (SSDL) to explain the extent learners progress through stages of self-direction. The fundamental concept of SSDL model is focused on students contrasting aptitudes to respond to teaching that requires self-direction. An instructor can assist or hamper a student's development regarding enhanced self-direction (Grow, 1991). The SSDL delineated methods for teachers to actively groom students to progress into a self-directed learner. Teachers work to meet numerous responsibilities because students inherently are in different stages of self-direction (Grow, 1991).

SSDL uses four stages to explain a student's level of self-direction. S1 students are dependent on the teacher throughout the learning process and prefer a teacher that is an authority (Grow, 1991). Grow (1991) found those students in the S2 category to be interested in the learning process and prefer an instructor that is a motivator. Students in the S3 category are involved in the learning process and prefer a teacher that is a facilitator. S4 students have reached the highest level of self-direction and prefer an instructor that is a delegator. The fundamental aspect of the SSDL is for students and teachers to be at equivalent stages in the model in order for self-directed learning to develop (Grow, 1991).

Self-directed learning has been examined in previous agricultural education studies. Louisiana agriscience teachers' level of self-directedness was investigated by Kotrlik, Redmann, Harrison, and Handley (2000). Texas 4-H members' level of self-directed learning was studied by Stafford, et al. (2003). Understanding students' followership style and self-directed learning tendencies is another way for academics to increase their effectiveness inside and outside of the classroom. Understanding the correlation between the two variables will give academics a more holistic picture of their students. There is a lack of studies in the literature involving followership styles and self-directedness of agricultural leadership students in academic departments.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to assess undergraduate students' levels of followership and self-directed learning in agricultural leadership courses at Texas A&M University. The study sought to:

1. Describe students' levels of critical thinking, engagement, and self-directedness;
2. Examine the relationship between followership styles, personal characteristics and students' level of self-directedness; and
3. Examine the effects of followership styles, and personal characteristics on students' level of self-directedness.

Methodology

Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2012) indicated quantitative research utilizes deductive reasoning to examine theories, numerical data, cause, and effect. The population of this study was (N = 573) undergraduate students enrolled in agricultural leadership courses at Texas A&M University. The independent variables in this study were gender, grade classification, grade point

average, employment status, and followership styles. Students' level of self-directed learning was the dependent variable in this study.

A combined 37 item instrument including Kelly's (1992) Followership Style Questionnaire, Richards' (2005) self-directed learning instrument, and questions related to personal characteristics was used to collect data in order to answer the study's research objectives. Content validity of the combined instrument was assessed by leadership and adult learning researchers at Texas A&M University.

The Followership Styles Questionnaire used a seven-point summated scale for each item with anchors: 7 = *Almost Always***,** 5 = *Occasionally*, and 1 = *Rarely* (Kelly, 1992). The critical thinking construct related to items 1, 5, 11, 12, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, and 20 in the scale. The engagement construct related to items 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, and 15 in the scale. Constructs of the Followership Styles Questionnaire were calculated *ex post facto*. Critical thinking earned a reliability coefficient of .87 and engagement= .84. Sheep followers score 0-18 on critical thinking and 0-18 on engagement. Yes people followers score 0-18 on critical thinking and 42-60 on engagement. Alienated followers score 42-60 on critical thinking and 0-18 on engagement. Pragmatic followers score 19-41 on critical thinking and 19-41 on engagement. Star followers score 42-60 on critical thinking and 42-60 on engagement (Kelly, 1992).

Richards (2005) developed a self-directed learning instrument aligned with Grow's (1991) Staged Self-Directed Learning Model to examine students' level of self-directedness. The self-directed learning instrument included 24 items and included anchors: 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Agree*, and 4 = *Strongly Agree*. Richards' (2005) self-directed learning instrument produced a reliability coefficient of $\alpha = .91$ for this study.

Survey methodology was utilized to collect data, and the researchers used Qualtrics to construct a web-based questionnaire. The Tailored Design Method for developing and distributing an electronic questionnaire was employed for this study (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). A random sample ($n = 286$) of the targeted population ($N = 573$) was created using random number generator in Excel. The benefit of a random sample is the capability to generate a sample that is representative of the targeted population to assist in generalizing the results to the population (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

The sample received an email notification and two days later received an email that included a link to the questionnaire in Qualtrics. Two separate emails, both a week apart, were sent to non-respondents. One hundred seventy-two ($n = 172$) participants responded yielding a response rate of 60.10%. Lindner, Murphy, and Briers' (2001) approach to compare early and late respondents to assess nonresponse error was implemented. There were no significant differences between early and late respondents, and therefore, the results can be generalized to undergraduate agricultural leadership students in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications at Texas A&M University. Six responses were deleted due to incomplete information, and the resulting one hundred sixty-six ($n = 166$) responses were utilized in the data analysis.

The data were analyzed through the use of descriptive statistics, correlation coefficients, and multiple regression analysis. Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze the level of students' self-directedness, Fraenkel et al. (2012) indicated descriptive statistics enable researchers to describe the data in numerical form.

Correlation coefficients were used to analyze the relationship between followership styles and students' level of self-directedness. Correlations signify the direction and magnitude of variable relationships between -1.00 and +1.00 (Davis, 1971). Correlational research uses data to determine the degree of a relationship between two or more variables (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

Fraenkel et al. (2012) indicated multiple regression assists researchers in determining a link among a criterion variable and two or more independent variables. Multiple regression analysis was used to understand the effects of followership styles, and personal characteristics, on students' level of self-directed learning.

All participants were undergraduates (N = 166, 100%). Most of participants were male (n = 102, 61.45%), one hundred nine students (65.27%) worked part-time, and n = 88 (52.69%) had a GPA (grade point average) between 2.99 and 2.50. The majority of participants were yes-person followers (n = 87, 52.41%). Though the findings were not generalizable beyond the target population, the results do offer researchers and practitioners insights on factors that influenced agricultural leadership students' level of followership and self-directed learning levels.

Findings

The first objective of the study was to describe students' critical thinking, engagement, and level of self-directedness. "Do you act on your own ethical standards rather than the professor's or the group's standards?" (M = 6.51, SD = .74) and "Would your future or current work situation help you fulfill some societal goal or personal dream that is important to you?" (M = 6.36, SD = .81) earned the highest scores for critical thinking (see Table 1).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Critical Thinking

Items	*N*	*M*	*SD*
Do you act on your own ethical standards rather than the professor's or the group's standards?	166	6.51	.74
Would your future or current work situation help you fulfill some societal goal or personal dream that is important to you?	166	6.36	.71
Do you try to solve the tough problems (technical or organizational), rather than look to the professor to do it for you?	166	4.90	.59
Do you make a habit of internally questioning the wisdom of the professor's decision rather than just doing what you were told?	166	4.89	.66
Instead of waiting for or merely accepting what the professor tells you, do you personally identify which course activities are most critical for achieving the course's priority goals?	166	4.23	.88
Do you help the professor or group see both the upside potential and downside risks of ideas or plans, playing the devil's advocate if need be?	166	3.94	.64
When the professor asks you to do something that runs contrary to your professional or personal preferences, do you say "no" rather than "yes"?	166	3.46	.77
Do you actively and honestly own up to your strengths and weaknesses rather than put off evaluation?	166	2.67	.59
Do you assert your views on important issues, even though it might mean conflict with your group or reprisals from the professor?	166	1.89	.63
Do you independently think up and champion new ideas that will contribute significantly to the professor's or the universities' goals?	166	1.36	.47

Note. Overall M = 4.02, SD = .68. *Scale:* 7 =*Almost Always*, 4 = *Occasionally*, 1 =*Rarely*.

As a part of the study's first objective, students' engagement was examined (see Table 2). The highest scoring items were "Do you understand the professor's needs, goals, and constraints, and work hard to help meet them?" (M = 6.45, SD = .73) and "When starting a new job or assignment, do you promptly build a record of successes in tasks that are important to the professor?" (M = 6.09, SD = .89). The item with the lowest scores was "When you are not the

leader of a group project, do you still contribute at a high level, often doing more than your share?" (*M* = 1.98, *SD* = .53).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Engagement

Items	*N*	*M*	*SD*
Do you understand the professor's needs, goals, and constraints, and work hard to help meet them?	166	6.45	.73
When starting a new job or assignment, do you promptly build a record of successes in tasks that are important to the professor?	166	6.09	.89
Do you believe your current personal educational goals are aligned with your university's organizational goals?	166	5.51	.72
Do you think your enthusiasm will spread to and energize your current peers?	166	5.44	1.04
Can the professor give you a difficult assignment without the benefit of much supervision, knowing that you will meet your deadline with highest-quality work and that you will "fill in the cracks" if need be?	166	5.34	1.06
Do you actively develop a distinctive competence in those critical activities so that you become more valuable to the professor and the course?	166	5.32	.96
Do you take the initiative to seek out and successfully complete assignments that go above and beyond minimum expectations?	166	5.13	.97
Do you feel you are highly committed and energized by your university giving them your best ideas and performance?	166	5.04	1.12
Do you help out other students, making them look good, even when you don't get any credit?	166	4.84	.87
When you are not the leader of a group project, do you still contribute at a high level, often doing more than your share?	166	1.98	.53

Note. Overall *M* = 5.11, *SD* = .93. *Scale:* 7 = *Almost Always,* 5=*Occasionally,* 1 = *Rarely.*

Describing students' level of self-directedness was a part of the first objective (see Table 3). The item that earned the highest score (*M* = 2.69, *SD* = .74) was "I set my own goals for learning without the help of the instructor." The item that earned the lowest score (*M* = 2.12, *SD* = .95) was "I learn best when I set my own goals."

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Students' Level of Self-directedness (*N* = 166)

	N	*M*	*SD*
I set my own goals for learning without the help of the instructor.	166	2.69	.74
I am capable of assessing the quality of assignments that I submit.	166	2.31	.89
I am willing to take responsibility for my own learning.	166	2.29	.88
I prefer that the instructor provide direction only when requested.	166	2.24	.96
I use resources outside of class to meet my goals.	166	2.22	.91
I have prior knowledge and skills in this subject area.	166	2.18	.93
I prefer individual work or a self-directed study group as the teaching delivery method.	166	2.15	.89
I learn best when I set my own goals.	166	2.12	.95

Note. Overall *M* = 2.28, *SD* = .89. *Scale:* 4 = *Strongly Agree*, 3 = *Agree*, 2= *Disagree*, 1 = *Strongly Disagree.*

The second objective of the study was to examine the relationship between followership styles, and students' level of self-directedness (see Table 4). There were *n* = 87 yes-person, *n* = 42 sheep, *n* = 31 alienated, *n* = 6 star, and *n* = 0 pragmatic followers in the study.

Table 4

The Relationship between Followership Styles and Level of Self-directedness (N = 166)

		Level of Self-directedness	
Followership Styles	*N*	*r*	*p*
Yes-person	87	.51	.00*
Sheep	42	.44	.00*
Alienated	31	.18	.04*

Note. Magnitude: $.01 \geq r \geq .09$ = Negligible, $.10 \geq r \geq .29$ = Low, $.30 \geq r \geq .49$ = Moderate, $.50 \geq r \geq .69$ = Substantial, $r \geq .70$ = Very Strong (Davis, 1971).
*$p < .05$.

The third objective of the study was to examine the effects of followership styles, and personal characteristics on students' level of self-directedness. The regression model was significant and indicated a good fit, with $F = 6.13$, $p < .05$. Yes-person, sheep, and alienated followership styles, and student's GPA was significant $p < .05$ on level of self-directedness. GPA was the lone personal characteristic that was significant on students' level of self-directedness.

As the yes-person followership style increased one unit, level of self-directedness increased .24 (see Table 5). As the sheep followership style increased one unit, level of self-directedness increased .20. As GPA increased one unit, level of self-directedness increased .15. As the alienated followership style increased one unit, level of self-directedness increased .10. The regression model for this study was illustrated as: self-directedness = .21 + .24 yes-person + .20 sheep + .15 GPA + .10 Alienated. The model accounted for (29%) variance in undergraduate agricultural leadership students' level of self-directedness.

Table 5

Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis of Followership Styles and Students' Level of Self-directedness (N = 166)

	B	*SE B*	*p*
Intercept	.21	.26	
Yes-person	.24	.04	.00
Sheep	.20	.06	.00
GPA	.15	.08	.00
Alienated	.10	.17	.02

Note. $R^2 = .31$; *Adjusted* $R^2 = .29$.

Conclusions

The results suggested the majority of the leadership students were engaged, yet uncritical followers. As the majority of this sample was yes-person followers, it can be concluded while eager to please their professor, students are not willing challenge the established rules or doctrine of the professor and the discipline. The lack of star and pragmatic followers to analyze suggested that the population was not inclined to independently assess the dependability of a leadership decision and were not quick to follow.

Participants in the study were S2 students as it relates to self-directed learning. There was a relationship with specific followership styles and level of self-directedness. The regression analysis showed that as the unit for followership of yes-person, sheep, and alienated students increased, self-directed learning increased at least .10. This can be explained by the increase of critical thinking with each increase of followership score. It can be concluded those followers who are more critical thinkers are more likely to be self-directed learners. The plausibility that less self-directed students are more likely to be dependent followers with less critical thinking capacity exists. Students with higher GPA's are more self-directed learners.

Implications

Classroom dynamics are an influential factor in the learning process (Cummins, 1995). Faculty may not self-identify as leaders, but students look to faculty to help them navigate the learning process (Osborne, 2011). The small proportion of star and pragmatic followers suggested agricultural leadership students are not independent, critical thinking followers. According to Kelly (2008), followers who are more independent do not believe the leaders have all of the correct answers all of the time. For many students, professors are seen as "all-knowing" entities whose job is to impart knowledge upon them (Rosovsky, 1990). It can be implied the perceived role of professor "sage on the stage" may inherently inhibit students' desire to question the authority of the professor in a critical way.

The high engagement level of the majority of students surveyed is a positive implication for this study. This implies agricultural leadership faculty at Texas A&M University created a climate where there is not a bureaucratic air. This supports Carsten et al's (2010) finding that organizational climate affects engagement levels of followers, and the flatter the organizational structure, the more likely followers are to be engaged. This brings to bear the interesting dichotomy of organizational climate and critical thinking. The findings of this study lead one to believe that by flattening the leadership hierarchy, the leaders' ability to engage the follower in self-directed critical thinking decreases. Leaders in the classroom must find a way to incorporate both practices if they want to produce effective followers who are self-directed learners.

S2 students want instructors who are more of a motivator than a facilitator or a consultant (Grow, 1991). This leadership, and potential teaching style, would engage S2 students as well as those who are not as independent as followers. Instructors should want to move students from the S2 status to eventually becoming a more independent student in the S4 domain (Grow, 1991). Understanding followership styles could assist instructors in moving students from S2 learners to more independent learners.

Recommendations

A larger sample of star and pragmatic followers is necessary in order to examine the potential relationship with those leadership styles and students' level of self-directed learning. A national study of agricultural leadership students would provide a large enough sample to determine if star and pragmatic followership is associated with students' level of self-directed learning. The data could also provide a broader generalization to agricultural leadership students nationally instead of a single university. The data presented here provided an insight to the influence of yes-person, sheep, and alienated followers on students' level of self-directedness. A national study may provide similar or dissimilar findings, but broaden our literature on followership and level of self-directedness.

Maturation has been found as a developmental factor in critical thinking (Burbach et al., 2012). Future research could examine the age or class year of the student and see if there is a difference between independent, critical thinking competencies of younger, less experienced students verses older, more experienced students. A longitudinal study following students' self-perceived followership style and self-directed learning from freshman through senior year would also yield more empirical research for the field.

Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications (ALEC) faculty should replicate this study with agricultural education, leadership, and communications students to measure the differences between and among each discipline. Another potential study could examine ALEC students and bench science students by assessing any differences between each population's followership style and level of self-directedness. A comparison study among ALEC students and students from other social science disciplines would be beneficial. Each of these proposed studies would add to the literature, and give our profession a better understanding of how our student's followership styles and level of self-directedness compare to their peers. Investigating students in dissimilar academic disciplines would add empirical literature to the arenas of followership and self-directed learning in collegiate environments.

Agricultural leadership, education, and communication faculty should develop a better understanding of students' followership styles in order to best prepare and deliver topical courses. Knowing where students lie on Kelly's (2008) model of followership will allow faculty to be better leaders as teachers (Greiman, 2009). Understanding the self-directed level of the students can aid faculty in the development of progressive course assignments, which would result in students becoming more self-directed learners (Grow, 1991) with the capacity for critical thinking (Stedman, 2009). This enhanced capacity of diverse perspectives will assist faculty in better preparing students for the professional workforce, regardless of professional context (Doerfert, 2011).

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