

# Through Rose Colored Glasses

By A Caring Critic

My first involvement with the FFA started in 1961 when I enrolled in high school agriculture. I have been actively involved with the organization ever since. While I think the FFA is a worthwhile organization, I am afraid we often look at the organization through rose colored glasses; perhaps even blinders.

Behavioral psychologists tell us if we say something over and over, we begin to believe it is true. This may be the case with certain "beliefs" about the FFA. We assert that the FFA develops "premier leadership, personal growth, and career success." But does it really? Just because we say it does, doesn't necessarily mean it really does.

Space limitations prevent me from an in-depth examination of all three FFA outcomes stated above; so let's just focus on the first one - premier leadership.

## Does the FFA develop premier leadership?

If there is one thing FFA supporters are adamant about, it is that FFA develops leadership. State supervisors, teacher educators, agriculture teachers, and FFA members believe this. The question I raise is, "what proof can be offered to support this view?" There is little valid evidence to support this view.

Those who maintain the FFA develops leadership offer as proof what is known as "selective sampling." They point to a few prominent persons who were in the FFA who are now leaders, such as Jimmy Carter. For every "prominent" former FFA member, there are an equal (if not greater) number of former FFA

members whom we would rather not acknowledge. Roger Drollinger, murdered four people in Indiana, on Valentines Day some years ago. Roger was a FFA member. How many other former FFA members sit in prisons? In order to prove FFA develops leadership (as evidenced by individuals in leadership positions) we would need to study a random sample of FFA members and non-FFA members. Selective sampling doesn't prove a thing.

A second error made by the pro-FFA leadership faction is the cause-effect error. They maintain because a person was in the FFA he/she is now a leader. The simple fact is that many of these individuals possess certain traits or qualities that are associated with leadership. Regardless of whether or not this person was in the FFA, these leadership qualities would emerge. Yet, we in the FFA are quick to claim credit.

An example of the cause-effect error can be seen in research conducted by Dr. Herron of the University of Georgia. He studied national FFA proficiency award winners in the early 1980s. Dr. Herron's research found that a large majority of the national winners already had the farming or experience program (livestock, crops, etc.) well established before they first enrolled in agricultural education. While the FFA would like to claim the credit for these students' success, the fact is the students were a long way down the road to success before becoming FFA members.

Martin McMillion of Virginia Tech conducted a study 30 years ago on leadership in vocational agriculture students and discovered leadership was associated with socioeconomic status. Dr. McMillion studied 94 students and found no differences between 10th, 11th, and 12th graders on leadership style or leadership ability. If FFA does increase leader-

ship skills, then there should have been a difference in leadership ability in the higher level students.

On the other side of the coin, there have been a couple of studies that purport to show the FFA develops leadership skills. In 1981 Dr. Chris Townsend had 426 Iowa vocational agriculture seniors rate their FFA participation and personal development. Dr. Townsend concluded that FFA activities assisted in the leadership and personal development of the members. I would question whether a student's own self rating is the best way to measure leadership.

Dr. Clifton Ricketts conducted a study in 1983 on leadership abilities of FFA members and non-members. He used a 66 item multiple choice test designed to measure leadership and personal development abilities. Data were collected from 258 students. Dr. Ricketts found that FFA members scored significantly higher than non-FFA members on the test. My question is does the ability to answer questions about parliamentary procedure, conducting meetings, managing financial resources, etc. on a paper and pencil test really measure leadership? I think not.

One of Dr. Rickett's conclusions was very interesting, "The extent to which students that have been enrolled in vocational agriculture/FFA for four years, possess leadership and personal development abilities is much less than this writer feels that the profession should be willing to accept." Even though the FFA members scored higher on the test, Dr. Ricketts thought the scores were too low.

## Conclusion

It pains me to admit there is virtually no solid evidence to support the contention that FFA develops leadership. If this is what we claim to be about, then this needs our attention during the 21st century.