THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
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As members of the Master's Committee, we certify that we have read the thesis prepared by Joshua Troub, titled Western State FFA State Officer Selection Process: A Case Study Analysis and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Master's Degree.

Amber Rice, PhD  Date: 8/14/20

Robert Torres, PhD  Date: 8/14/20

Quintin Molina, MS  Date: 8/14/20

Final approval and acceptance of this thesis is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copies of the thesis to the Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this thesis prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the Master's requirement.

Amber Rice, PhD  Date: 8/14/20

Master's Thesis Committee Chair
Agricultural Education, Technology and Innovation
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Abstract

Leadership selection within Western State FFA was qualitatively researched through individual interviews and focus groups with state FFA nominating committees from 2017, 2018, and 2019. A document analysis of nominating committee documents was also completed. The main question addressed was how do Western State FFA nominating committees determine quality youth leadership? Secondary research questions included: (1) What attributes do Western State FFA nominating committees’ value for quality youth leadership? and (2) How do Western State FFA nominating committees determine if state officer candidates possess these attributes? The information gleaned from this study may potentially be used by future nominating committees, leaders, and state FFA staff to inform decisions related to the leadership selection of state officers. The findings from the document analysis, interviews, and focus groups were divided into the three following categories: Nominating Committees’ Overarching Priorities for Candidate Selection, Objectivity and Subjectivity of the Nominating Committee Process, and Nominating Committees’ Skepticism towards the Selection Process. The attributes sought by the nominating committees under study did not always align with the attributes listed in state officer selection documents and loosely matched current youth leadership models. Suggestions for changing the current nominating committee process to align with the findings of this study and youth leadership research are therefore also discussed.
Introduction

Leadership, as a concept, exists to achieve and sustain societal pursuits important for the common good of humanity (Caulfield, 2013). Northouse (2012) explains that leadership is a process whereby individuals influence a group of followers towards a common goal. A vast array of leadership definitions are present in the literature, which has led to multiple approaches toward conceptualization, theory development, and practice (Hernandez et al., 2011). While many definitions of leadership exist, there are commonalities that emerge among various authors including foci on traits, abilities, skills, behaviors, relationships, and/or influence (Northouse, 2012). Despite these commonalities, it is not always clear what is desired of individuals in leadership roles within the context of specific situations (Northouse, 2012). Related to the development of future leaders, there is a paucity of research that addresses identification of individuals for leadership roles and how leadership development occurs (Northouse, 2012).

Leadership development in the United States is currently approached through a variety of programs, courses, and organizations (Boyd, 2011). Many organizations value leadership as one of their primary tenants and others espouse that leadership development is integral to the mission of the organization. One central focus is developing leadership in youth populations, as they are often seen as having the greatest impact on the future of society (Horstmeier & Nall, 2007). Youth leadership development can be seen in community-based organizations such as 4-H, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts or through formal educational programs such as FFA and FCCLA (Horstmeier & Nall, 2007). One of the largest school-based youth leadership organizations is the National FFA Organization with 700,170 members (National FFA, 2020). The mission of FFA is to develop premier leadership in its members through agricultural education activities that focus on community-based leadership competencies, soft-skill development, and character (National
FFA, 2020). One opportunity that encourages leadership development among FFA members is active participation in a variety of leadership positions (Dormody & Seevers, 1994). Positive youth development in the form of holding leadership positions is associated with high levels of self-regulation among youth (Lerner & Lerner, 2013) and perceived increases in belonging and self-esteem of members (Rose et al., 2016), which can directly impact the progression of modern society as members transition from youth to adulthood (Lerner et al., 2009).

FFA uses a variety of selection procedures to elect leaders, referred to as officers, at three different levels: national, state, and local (National FFA, 2020). The description of officer responsibilities and duties within the organization are clearly outlined across all three levels of leadership in the official FFA manual (National FFA, 2020); however, there is limited clarity on what quality leadership entails and purposeful selection of qualified individuals at each level. A lack of consistency in leadership selection and conceptualization, along with the importance of strong leadership in society, leads to a need for understanding how quality leadership is determined in large youth leadership organizations such as the FFA (Horstmeier & Nall, 2007).

Specifically, at the state and national levels, officers are selected using nominating committees. Some research has been conducted on leadership selection by nominating committees at the national level of the FFA; however, the focus has been on the transferability of nominating committee training to the selection of officers (Bruce & Ricketts, 2007). Bruce and Ricketts (2007) found that FFA nominating committees at the national level were able to develop norms and adhere to them throughout the process of leadership selection; however, they did not address whether the developed norms were consistent or included a definition of quality leadership within the context of FFA. Therefore, it is still unknown how quality leadership is conceptualized and determined by FFA nominating committees at all levels, including state level
officer selection. Because of the impact youth organizations have on society and the emphasis placed on leadership within the FFA, there is need to examine how leadership is perceived within this organization, with consideration to the nominating committees that select youth for leadership positions.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore perspectives of FFA nominating committees at the state level who are responsible for selecting youth to serve in leadership roles. How the nominating committees view potential candidates, which attributes they value, and how they define those attributes will be examined in depth and lead to a greater understanding of the leadership selection process in the selected Western State. The information gleaned from this study may potentially be used by future nominating committees, leaders, and state FFA staff to inform decisions related to the leadership selection of state officers. The purpose of this study aligns with the American Association for Agricultural Education 2016-2020 Research Agenda priority number 5, Efficient and Effective Agricultural Education Programs (Roberts et al., 2016). The following central research question guided the study: How do Western State FFA nominating committees determine quality youth leadership? Secondary research questions included: (1) What attributes do Western State nominating committees’ value for quality youth leadership? and (2) How do Western State nominating committees determine if state officer candidates possess these attributes?

**Review of Literature**

**Levels of Leadership in the FFA**

Prior to exploring how Western State FFA nominating committees discern quality leadership, it is crucial to understand the levels of leadership in the National FFA Organization
along with the duties of state officers and the officer selection process. The National FFA Organization is organized into three levels: national, state, and local (National FFA, 2020), with some states also having regional or district level leadership teams. The national level is comprised of six elected national officers and a Board of Directors; however, the state level varies amongst states in the number of officers, involvement of elected officers, and the duties they are expected to perform, as long as it operates within the limits of the National FFA constitution (National FFA, 2020). State FFA Associations also operate with an advisor and executive secretary, who are often employees of the State Department of Education (Western State FFA, 2020) The local level is the final tier in the organizational levels of FFA. The number of officers and their specific duties and involvement can vary, but there is always an adult advisor that guides each local chapter (National FFA, 2020). The system is tiered so all chapters at the local level are chartered through the state level to the national level (National FFA, 2020). This study will focus on the state level officer election process guided by a nominating committee.

**Duties of Western State FFA Officers**

While duties vary across State FFA Associations, there are many commonalities across states. State officers represent the state and local levels to the national level (National FFA, 2020). Specifically in the state of focus for this study, elected officers are expected to adhere to the following expectations: student-oriented service, team-centered attitude, willingness to develop oneself, moral conduct, ability to live a public life, ability to balance school/ personal time, and commitment of time to FFA (Western State FFA, 2020). The ability to travel extensively and dress professionally are additional requirements for Western State FFA Officers (Western State FFA, 2020). According to the Western State officer application, candidates must
maintain positive relationships with stakeholders and members, advocate for agriculture, assist in managing local programs, and serve as role models for members (Western State FFA, 2020).

**Conceptual Framework**

To conceptualize leadership within the Western State FFA Association, I utilized the Youth Leadership Framework developed by Sherif (2019), see Figure 1. Sherif’s (2019) framework describes youth leadership utilizing cognitive, motivational, affective, and behavioral domains, all anchored within an ethical domain (Sherif, 2019). Together, these five domains provide a comprehensive outline of youth leadership development that encompasses multiple existing theories of youth leadership (Sherif, 2019).

**Figure 1.**

*Youth Leadership Framework (Sherif, 2019)*

The cognitive domain includes youth perception and knowledge of leadership (Sherif, 2019). Youth can define leadership and draw connections between leadership positions, characteristics, community development, personality, and learning (Sherif, 2019). For example,
youth may initially perceive firmness of beliefs to be necessary for quality leadership, but after participating in a youth leadership organization, they realize that compromising can also be beneficial for effective leadership. Furthermore, youth perception of leadership is a component of the cognitive domain as youth realize the role leadership can have in making positive change in their environment (Sherif, 2019). For example, youth might perceive leadership as not worthwhile if they held a position in the student council and were unable to make decisions or positively impact the student membership.

The motivational domain relates to youth fulfilling their individual needs and the needs of the organization they represent and their drive towards personal development in a leadership capacity (Sherif, 2019). When youth realize the positive impact that leadership development can have on group morale and relationships, they can develop an appreciation for practicing and developing their personal leadership (Sherif, 2019). Additionally, motivation relates to the ability of youth to fulfill their needs of positive experiences, positive emotions, and collection of internally meaningful leadership knowledge (Sherif, 2019). For example, if youth hold a position in a well-ran student council and experience success in making changes for the student body, they can fulfill their need for personal success and further seek to solve problems of the membership.

The affective domain encompasses youth emotions and attitudes towards leadership and is largely reflective of youth interactions with other people in a leadership capacity (Sherif, 2019). For example, when elected as a captain of a soccer team, youth who have teammates who are jealous and demeaning to the position may feel regret in receiving the position. If the teammates instead interact with the soccer captain positively, with hi-fives or words of affirmation, then they may feel honored and have a positive attitude towards their newly
acquired position. Inversely, if the teammates yell or bully the soccer captain, they may develop fear or other negative attitudes and emotions towards leadership. How youth feel about leadership can ultimately impact their decision to remain in a leadership position, pursue a future leadership position, or even be a supporting member of a team (Sherif, 2019).

The behavioral domain focuses on the actions youth may take that are reflective of their leadership development in the cognitive, motivational, and affective domains (Sherif, 2019). By taking action as a leader, they are developing skills and confidence necessary for further growth as leaders (Sherif, 2019). While acting as a committee chair in a youth organization, youth may display quality communication with their committee members, which indicates their leadership development and acts as further communication practice. The more youth apply their leadership skills, the further they can develop as leaders (Sherif, 2019).

The previous four domains are all anchored within the ethical domain (Sherif, 2019). Various leadership theories point towards integrity as being a key trait in effective leaders (Northouse, 2012). In youth leadership, ethical leadership is how the other domains are applied according to values and character (Sherif, 2019). Without ethics, a leader’s ability to influence others may be weakened (Northouse, 2012). For example, while hiking with younger members in an outdoor club, youth who leave the younger members behind may not hold as much influence as youth who stay back and help younger members overcome obstacles. By making decisions perceived as ethical by their followers, leaders can gain respect and influence (Northouse, 2012).

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

**Theoretical Framework**

In addition to conceptualizing youth leadership, it is also important to frame the selection process for electing Western State FFA officers through the nominating committee. The Interviewee Framework developed by Huffcutt et al. (2011) was used to frame the forms of communication that occur during the selection process and the interactions that occur between interviewee performance and interviewer ratings (see Figure 2). *Interviewee performance* is seen as an intermediary component between *interviewee attributes* and *interviewer ratings*. Therefore, it is important to identify the perspectives and corresponding definitions of leadership used by the nominating committee (i.e. interviewers) and how state officer candidates (i.e. interviewees) communicate leadership traits to the nominating committee.
Within performance appraisal literature, it is often concluded that supervisor reflections are imperfect representations of actual job performance (Huffcutt et al., 2011). Huffcutt et al. (2011) proposes that interviewer ratings are also imperfect appraisals of performance during an interview. Interviewee performance should, in theory, represent the skills and attributes of the interviewee; however, there are many external factors that also influence this performance (Huffcutt et al., 2011). Through the Interviewee Framework, Huffcutt et al. (2011) encourages researchers and interviewers alike to take these external factors into account before drawing
conclusions during an interview. Influencing factors are categorized as impacting the interviewer ratings and/or the interviewee performance.

General attributes and core candidate qualifications are internal factors of the interviewee that may impact an interview. General attributes are antecedents of the core candidate qualifications because they are more indicative of who the interviewee is, what traits they possess, experience they have, and overall mental capacity (Huffcutt et al., 2011). These affect the core candidate qualifications, what the interviewee knows, can do, and how much effort they are willing to expend (Huffcutt et al., 2011). Both sets of factors influence the overall interviewee performance; however, they are not always presented accurately or completely to the interviewer(s) (Huffcutt et al., 2011).

Three additional factors also influence interviewee performance but are not typically evaluated during the actual interview. One of these factors is interviewer-interviewee dynamics, which draws from social influence theory. Social influence theory suggests that all interpersonal interactions result in influence between the parties (Huffcutt et al., 2011). For example, an interviewer’s personality may influence the sociability of the interviewee. Furthermore, supplemental preparation, in the form of interview training or experience, can also influence the ability of the interviewee to present themselves effectively (Huffcutt et al., 2011). A well-trained interviewee in the interview process may not be as well suited for the job as a interviewee without any interview experience or training, but they could more effectively present their qualifications. The last set of interviewee factors that influences interviewee performance is interviewee state influences. These refer to the mindset, anxiety, or confidence levels interviewees possess coming into an interview (Huffcutt et al., 2011). While confidence may not
affect the ability to do a job well, it still influences the interview, and subsequently the chances of selection.

On the interviewer side of the model, there is one set of factors that influences the interviewer ratings. Interviewer information processing effects are the ability of the interviewer to decipher and interpret the interview. Whether or not it is intentional, interviewers are limited in how much information they can synthesize and process when making a decision, and biases towards certain types of information also occur (Huffcutt et al., 2011). Since the interviewer can only view the interview through their own lens, this should be considered when evaluating interview processes.

Lastly, there are two factors that impact both interviewer rating and interviewee performance, and these are influenced by the interaction of the interviewee with the interviewer. Demographic/personal characteristics that can impact interviewee performance and corresponding ratings include the cultural backgrounds, race, gender identity, and perceived attractiveness of both parties (Huffcutt et al., 2011). Similarity-attraction paradigm suggests that individuals who discern similarities in race, gender identity, culture, and other features are more favorable towards interviewees (Huffcutt et al., 2011). While theoretically they should not impact the interview process, there is ample research that suggests they do (Huffcutt et al., 2011). The second factor that affects both performance and ratings is interview design considerations. Everything from the layout of the process, the medium used to communicate, and the availability of information available prior to the interview can impact the performance and rating of interviewees (Huffcutt et al., 2011). If an interview process is confusing or complicated, there may be a lack of understanding in what the interviewer expects to find and what the interviewee is expected to do. This could be mitigated through pre-interview information, but the
accessibility and availability of pre-interview information is not always guaranteed or equally distributed to interviewees. The three most common mediums of communication during an interview are face to face, phone, and video (Huffcutt et al., 2011). Interviewees can respond differently to each medium, and the individual responses to the medium employed can impact the interview and subsequent outcomes (Huffcutt et al., 2011).

Ultimately, The Interviewee Performance Framework graphically displays a comprehensive understanding of the various factors that influence the interview process (Huffcutt et al., 2011). By taking all factors into consideration when evaluating what nominating committees look for in candidates, it will be more feasible to determine which factors are influential during the nominating committee’s evaluation of state officer candidate performance. Since this case study is focused on determining how the nominating committees (i.e. interviewers) perceive quality state office candidates (i.e. interviewees), only sections of the framework directly corresponding to the interviewer role will be directly observable; these include interview design considerations, demographic and personal characteristics, and interviewer information processing effects. The sections related to the interviewees are also relevant and may surface through the nominating committees’ perceptions of interviewee elements such as core candidate qualifications, general attributes, supplemental preparation, and interviewee state influences.

**Methods**

I employed a multi-case study research design to answer my research questions. Case studies are intensive analyses bounded by space and time that often examine groups or events (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). Each year of nominating committees are bound by time and space and examine a specific group. Since there are three years studied, there are multiple cases.
Sociological case studies are focused on society, and one facet of sociological research focuses on the collective behavior of organized groups of individuals (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). Since the Western State FFA nominating committee is an organized group of individuals who must come to a collective decision regarding quality state officer candidates, a sociological case study was appropriate to address my research questions.

**Epistemology and Positionality**

I approached this case study from a pragmatic lens. Pragmatism focuses on the outcome of research; the actions and consequences as a result of the inquiry (Creswell, 2013). Conducting research using a pragmatic lens involves approaching the research question with multiple methods of data collection, multiple data sources, and a focus on practical applications of the findings (Creswell, 2013). Pragmatism supports the multi-case study design because each individual case is being examined through at least three data sources: interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. I examined the most recent years of nominating committees to increase the practical application of research to development in Western State FFA.

It is also important to address my positionality to disclose my expertise and potential biases (Creswell, 2013). I am a past FFA state officer candidate who went through the interview process, served as a state FFA officer, served as a nominating committee chair, and trained multiple state officer candidates over the last five years. In addition to having trained FFA members to run for state office, I have also been a state officer trainer for those who are selected as state officers. I have worked closely with all Western State FFA staff and knew many participants personally prior to conducting my research.
Description of the Case

The nominating committee is charged with making key decisions during the state officer selection process (Western State FFA, 2020). The committee is composed of thirteen individuals: one past state officer committee chair, one adult advisor, three past state officers, and eight current Western State FFA members (Western State FFA, 2020). The State FFA Executive Secretary appoints the three past state officers and the advisor to the committee, and the State FFA Executive Secretary and current state president collectively determine the nominating committee chair (Western State FFA, 2020). Thus, the State FFA Executive Secretary directly influences five of the thirteen members on each nominating committee. As a result of this phenomenon, I decided to explore three separate nominating committees occurring under the same Western State FFA Executive Secretary for consistency of my findings.

Furthermore, by studying the most recent nominating committees, I was able to address a range of perspectives. Some of the members were still in college, while others had since graduated college after serving on the nominating committee. Recency of the participants’ involvement also permits better memory of the process. To be included in the study, participants must have served on at least one of the nominating committees during 2017, 2018, and/or 2019. Each nominating committee member was sent state officer applications to review prior to the interview process, and each nominating committee met for training before the selection process occurred (State FFA Executive Secretary, Personal Communication, 2019). Furthermore, each nominating committee was dispersed following the completion of the interview process (State FFA Executive Secretary, Personal Communication, 2019).

Information on the Western State FFA state officer selection process is public information and can be found on the Western State FFA website (Western State FFA, 2020).
There are five files available including the following: state officer candidate application, state officer candidate study guide, example behavioral interview questions, potential questions for the written test, and a potential candidate workshop PowerPoint (Western State FFA, 2020). The state officer candidates are required to complete an application, written test, writing exercise, and six rounds of interviews (Western State FFA, 2020). The six rounds of interviews consist of the following: short individual interviews similar to speed dating with each nominating committee member individually, a panel interview, an agricultural education conversation round, an agricultural issues conversation round, a workshop facilitation round, and a public speaking round. (Western State FFA, 2020). There is also an additional opportunity for a seventh interview round called committee’s choice. This round is optional for each candidate and decided on collectively by the nominating committee. The purpose of the committee choice round is to solicit additional information needed to assess the candidate. Throughout all the interview rounds, state officer candidates are being evaluated on the six traits outlined in the state officer candidate study guide: ambition, character, problem solving, interaction/teamwork, responsibility, and communication (Western State FFA, 2020). There is no document providing clarification on how these traits are defined; however, there is a bank of example behavioral questions that may be asked to evaluate each trait (Western State FFA, 2020).

**Participants**

I interviewed thirteen individuals in a focus group format, with three focus groups in total. Each focus group included four to five of the eight nominating committee members from a single year who were high school students during the time they served on the nominating committee. The former high school students were separated from the other committee members for two reasons. First, the past state officers and committee chairs served in executive roles
during each nominating committee and could create a power dynamic during the focus groups.

Second, the past state officers and committee chairs have more years of experience in addition to their executive roles that provides a different perspective of the nominating committee process. Tables 1-3 represent the participants in each focus group by pseudonym, year served, and their role on the nominating committee.

Table 1.

*Focus Group 1 Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Catheryn Fenway</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Michael Conway</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Caleb Sanders</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Kayla Corners</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Boston Rhoades</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.

*Focus Group 2 Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Jocelyn Wood</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Karlee Zip</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Savannah Gold</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Hugh Royal</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.

*Focus Group 3 Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Sandy Alderson</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Randy Albright</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Fiona Karston</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Gilbert Dunn</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to the three focus groups, I individually interviewed seven of the ten nominating committee members from all three years who were past state officers or nominating committee chairs at the time of interviews. Their experiences and unique roles during the officer selection process provided a different perspective from the former high school students. I conducted individual interviews in addition to the three focus groups to provide better insight into nominating committee decisions during the selection process (see Table 4).

**Table 4.**

*Individual Interview Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year(s)</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Tanya Rigsby</td>
<td>Past State Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>John Boyer</td>
<td>Past State Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017, 2018</td>
<td>Anthony Colter</td>
<td>Past State Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Bart Mathews</td>
<td>Past State Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Julio Kerry</td>
<td>Past State Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Tristen Barton</td>
<td>Past State Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Antonia Harold</td>
<td>Chair</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Sources and Collection**

I collected all data during the Spring of 2020. I used three major sources of data for my case study: focus groups, individual interviews, and document analysis. Using a variety of methods to collect data decreases the risk of chance associations and biases present in a single method of data collection, and allows for triangulation to occur (Maxwell, 2013). For case studies specifically, multiple sources of data allow for a more thorough and descriptive narrative to be formed around the complexity of variables under study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011).

For the focus groups, I obtained nominating committee member lists and contact information from the Western State FFA Executive Secretary. All three focus groups met via Zoom video conference technology during the months of March, April, and June. Each focus
group lasted approximately two hours and was recorded for transcription purposes. Some of the members were either out of state or had scheduling conflicts, and the conference call technology allowed them to be involved in the focus group via distance. The interview format was semi-structured, and I asked open-ended questions allowing any member of the group to answer or build off a previous answer. Semi-structured interview protocol in qualitative research is ideal since it balances flexibility with research focused questioning (Maxwell, 2013). Each question corresponds to a specific domain within Sherif’s (2019) Youth Leadership Framework and attended to Huffcutt et al.’s (2011) Interviewee Framework. An example focus group interview question was: What attributes affected candidate selection within the interview process?

In addition to the focus group interviews, I also conducted individual interviews. Individual interviews examine personal perspective outside of the group dynamic (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). By including individual interviews in addition to the focus groups, personal perspective and group perspective was more readily balanced. The individual interviews were conducted with seven members who had experience on multiple nominating committees and were completed using Zoom video conferencing software and transcribed for analysis. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour and was semi-structured in nature. An example individual interview question was: What reasons did selected candidates have for running for the leadership positions?

My final data source was documents that pertained to the overall nominating committee selection process. Document analysis combined with interviews and other methods of data collection provides important information and insight to address the research questions (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). For the document analysis, I analyzed documents available to the public through the Western State FFA website. I looked for any reference to qualities, skills, duties, or
characteristics related to state office and officer selection. Any attribute that was presented as a qualifier for leadership in the organization was placed into one of the domains within the Youth Leadership Framework (Sherif, 2019) and addressed components of the Interviewee Framework (Huffcutt et al., 2011).

**Data Analysis**

I utilized a three-tiered coding process to analyze the data from the individual interviews, focus groups, and documents. Coding involves the consolidation of text into concise categories, referencing other data sources to support those categories, and then labeling the categories according to a theme (Creswell, 2013). First, I open coded each transcription and determined concepts that inductively emerged. Inductive logic helps researchers develop more abstract themes from hard data sets (Creswell, 2013). I checked the developed codes against more data, modified or removed if needed, and then checked again until a comprehensive set of themes emerged. By inductively coding first, I ensured that I did not discount any concepts that may be excluded from a specific framework. According to Creswell (2013), inductive logic is paired with deductive logic to increase utilization of complex reasoning. While inductive reasoning allows for findings to emerge outside of the framework, deductive reasoning allows for analysis guided by the existing frameworks. Therefore, I compared the inductively developed themes to the Interviewee Framework (Huffcutt et al., 2011) and the Youth Leadership Framework (Sherif, 2019) using deductive reasoning. Themes were then developed from both coding sets and reported as the findings of the study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011).

**Trustworthiness**

To increase trustworthiness of the study I implemented the four following strategies: triangulation of data sources, memoing throughout data collection and analysis, rich and thick
description of participant quotes, and member checking of the themes presented in the findings of the study. Qualitative research must strive to address potential threats to trustworthiness during the research process (Maxwell, 2013). It is recommended that qualitative researchers implement at least two strategies to increase the trustworthiness of research (Creswell, 2013). The concepts of triangulation, member checking, and thick, rich description are among the most popular methods, and they are also the most time-effective approaches to ensuring trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013).

I implemented triangulation by using three different sources of data: focus groups, individual interviews, and document analysis. By conducting focus groups, I was able to obtain a group-oriented description of the processes and perspectives used to determine quality state officer candidates. The individual interviews counterbalanced the focus groups by allowing voices and personal perspectives to be heard and uninfluenced by a group setting. Document analysis further balanced the triangulation process by adding a non-human data source.

Memo taking during the interview and focus group process involved field notes during the interviews and capturing phrases, words, or ideas that emerged after the interviews. Memos should take the overarching thoughts from the research and create initial categories (Creswell, 2013). This better enabled me to make connections to concepts brought up during the interviews and focus groups and ensured I asked relevant questions moving forward. Since the memo process results in consistent modification during the case study process, it further ensured that I did not hold or develop misconceptions resulting from one interview or focus group.

Rich and thick description was presented throughout the findings and can be seen in the direct quotations taken from transcriptions of the interviews and focus groups. Lastly, I implemented member checking of the findings to ensure that the conclusions drawn from the
research are reflective of participants’ thoughts and perceptions during the interviews and focus groups. While rich and thick description presents research consumers with what participants communicated, member checking ensures that the communications are not misinterpreted according to the participants themselves (Maxwell, 2013).

**Findings**

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

**Nominating Committees’ Overarching Priorities for Candidate Selection**

Western State FFA nominating committees prioritized different traits when selecting leaders, some of which connected to the six traits laid out in the state officer selection guide (responsibility, problem-solving, character, teamwork/interaction, communication, and ambition), and others that emerged organically during the process. While the specific candidate attributes sought varied, all the Western State FFA nominating committees prioritized four overarching traits in state officer candidates: selflessness, people skills, growth mindset, and
commitment. Each of these subthemes is further broken down into specific attributes indicative of the trait. It is also important to note that while some nominating committee members used varying terms to describe a particular trait, these subthemes represent the essence of what a state officer candidate should be from the collective perspectives of the committees.

**Selflessness as a Desirable Trait**

Out of all the traits mentioned in focus groups and individual interviews, selflessness was the most consistently referenced by committee members and was weighted most heavily when electing state officers. Of the six traits identified in the Western State FFA officer study guide, selflessness aligns most directly with character. Character is not synonymous with selflessness, but they are associated through the commonality of ethics. The ethical domain is emphasized in the youth leadership framework (Sherif, 2019); thus, nominating committees’ focus on selflessness is congruent with this component of the Youth Leadership Framework. Selflessness also holds true to the conceptual framework as it relates to the motivational domain and candidates’ motives to run for state office. Selflessness can be broken down into the following components: member focus, humility, and a desire to serve.

Selflessness was most important to nominating committees in relation to candidates possessing a member focus. A member focused candidate was described as motivated to lead in order to benefit the members of the organization. Without evidence of a focus on members, state officer candidates would not be elected. While a variety of motivations to lead were referenced during interviews, only motives that reflected a desire to positively impact members were favored by the nominating committees. When asked what reasons state officer candidates gave for running and how it impacted selection, Randy, a 2019 student member, said, “If you're there for national office, then you're in it for the absolute wrong reason. If you're going to be a state
officer, you need to be there for the students and the organization because that's who needs you.” Thus, nominating committee members perceived member focus in candidates through candidates’ communicated reasons for running for state office. When candidates claimed they desired to be a state officer to advance to national office, nominating committee members identified such motivations as self-centered. If candidates mentioned a desire to benefit members in the Western State FFA, then nominating committee identified them as member focused. A member focus was also recognized when candidates interacted with FFA members outside of the formal interview rounds. Julio, a 2019 past state officer, said, “With the informal exchanges …, the only things I was looking for then was can you make the [FFA] members feel comfortable around you? Can you make it about them [FFA members]?” The more candidates talked about members and beneficially interacted with members; the more member focused they appeared to be to the nominating committees.

In addition to being focused on members, humility was another important aspect of selflessness. While a member focus indicated a directional motivation towards benefitting members, humility was indicated by the lack of focus candidates had on themselves. When candidates used inclusive language and distributed responsibility for achievements to others, they were seen as humble by the nominating committees. In quite a few cases, the use of personal pronouns clued nominating committee members into a lack of humility. Bart, a 2018 past state officer, explained, “When I hear kids that talk about ‘I’, you know that's a red flag for me.” It was not always detrimental to candidates if they talked about themselves, but it was important to the nominating committees that candidates balanced talking about themselves with conversation about members and the FFA. Julio, a 2019 past state officer, described this balance, “Candidates needed to keep that focus of trying to make it about a member, but at the same time, because it is
an interview, you need to make it at least somewhat about you.” Tristen, a 2019 past state officer, provided an example that exemplified humility, “There were some candidates like [an elected officer] that, to him, leadership was so selfless. And he talked about it in every response he gave. He would mention himself, but it was more talking about others...” While the state officer selection process involved interviewing candidates to determine who they were, Western State FFA nominating committees selected those leaders who could portray themselves well while remaining focused on others.

Lastly, selflessness was also seen in state officer candidates through a desire to serve. Service included a member focus but also expanded to the desire to serve the community, FFA as an organization, and the agriculture industry. Boston, a 2017 student member, described the key difference between service and a member focus:

That [serving members] is a wonderful bonus, but sometimes you want to serve because you’re passionate about agriculture and you want to continue to spread the message to students who might not be from the same background as you are. To me, it was important that you came in there and you wanted to give back to agriculture and give back to something that gave so much to you.

The term “give back” was among the most common phrases used during the interviews, especially concerning state officer candidates’ motivations to run for state office. Selected candidates were either motivated to run for state office through a member focus or to “give back” to FFA or the agriculture industry. Overall, selflessness was prioritized by nominating committees and seen through member focus, humility, and a desire to serve.
**People Skills as a Desirable Trait**

People skills were the second trait nominating committees looked for in state officer candidates. From the state officer application packet, the fifth responsibility of a state officer is to “…maintain positive relationships with members, agribusiness organizations, educational organizations, personnel within the agribusiness sector, the public and others interested in Agricultural Education and the FFA” (Western State FFA, 2020, p.16). Of the six responsibilities listed in the state officer application, four of the responsibilities require state officers to interact with members and stakeholders. Accordingly, people skills were deemed important in candidates by nominating committees to uphold the state officer responsibilities. In the Youth Leadership Framework, people skills are included in the behavioral domain as they represent leadership interactions with stakeholders and members, though there is also some overlap with the affective domain. The affective domain concerns youth emotions and attitudes (Sherif, 2019), and emotional connections are a component of beneficial interactions among individuals. People skills were described as any attribute assisting in candidates’ abilities to positively interact in a social environment; thus, it relates to two of the six traits from the state officer application—communication and teamwork/interaction. A candidate with people skills was described as relatable, outgoing, and communicative.

Relatability was considered by the nominating committees to be important in candidates as it assists state officers in socially connecting with members. Nominating committees valued relatability as they wanted FFA members to be comfortable communicating with the leaders of their organization. Kayla, a 2017 student member, discussed the importance of relatability in conjunction with being honest and forthcoming about previous mistakes. She said, “People are going to make mistakes for the rest of their lives. They [state officer candidates] also need to be able to relate to other students, who are going to make mistakes too.” Making mistakes was not
necessarily the only way to relate to FFA members; relatability also included similar interests and activities, understanding various situations, or even having a similar personality. One example of how a candidate’s personality was considered relatable was described by Boston, a 2017 student member. She said, “They're [candidate] quirky and awkward. Sometimes that's not always identified as a leader necessarily, but it was good for us as a committee to work through what type of member that would cater to.” The nominating committees acknowledged there are many different types of FFA members in the Western State FFA Association, and they sought out state officer candidates they thought would relate to a variety of members.

While candidates were selected for their relatability, it was also important to the nominating committee for them to be outgoing. Outgoing candidates were described as individuals comfortable with meeting new people and initiating conversations. While some candidates might be able to connect with members by being relatable, they did not always initiate interactions with new members with whom they could relate. Tanya, a 2017 past state officer, quipped, “Okay, are you [a candidate] just talking to students from your chapter or are you making an effort to learn to talk to other people?” Not making an effort to interact with all FFA members in a room was not favored by nominating committees. While candidates might relate well to members they already had pre-existing relationships with, nominating committees determined it was also important for them to be able to meet new members and relate with them too.

The last attribute related to people skills was strong communication. A candidate who could communicate well was described as having clarity of ideas and being easy to understand, both by the nominating committee members and the FFA membership. Randy, a 2019 student member, described communication struggles of previous state officer candidates, “Candidates
might have struggled with getting their ideas in their heads out verbally…We understood what
they were trying to say, but not every FFA member is going to really read into what they’re
saying.” Western State officers are expected to speak publicly at FFA chapter banquets across
the state and at multiple conferences as a part of their duties (Western State FFA, 2020). If
nominating committee members did not think candidates could be well understood while
communicating, then they were less likely to select those candidates because of the perceived
impact on their ability to relate to the members and stakeholders. In the end, candidates’ people
skills in the forms of being relatable, outgoing, and a strong communicator impacted nominating
committee selection.

*Growth Mindset as a Desirable Trait*

Thirdly, nominating committees valued candidates with a growth mindset. A growth
mindset describes individuals who pursue further development of skills, knowledge, and
understanding (Gupta, 2013). While a growth mindset may not directly relate to the six traits
listed in the Western State FFA officer application, it does relate to the motivational domain
within Sherif’s (2019) Youth Leadership Framework. The motivational domain reflects youth’s
willingness to further fulfill leadership potential (Sherif, 2019), and a motivated leader will
continue to grow and develop themselves. When candidates possess a growth mindset, they act
in accordance with what they believe and seek to better themselves as leaders. Candidates with
growth mindsets were described by nominating committees as genuine, introspective, and
professional. This growth mindset was viewed by nominating committees as a progression. First,
candidates had to be genuine and understand who they currently were at the time of the
interview; second, they had to be introspective and self-evaluative of strengths and areas of
improvement; and third, they had to demonstrate professionalism as a prospective state officer.
When asked why it was important for candidates to be genuine, Hugh, a 2018 student member, said, “It’s being able to be vulnerable and genuine, about especially the hard stuff, that really, truly allows state officers to connect with members.” Genuineness was often defined by nominating committees as candidates being honest and forthcoming with themselves, and the nominating committee, concerning areas of self-improvement. Kayla, a 2017 student member, explained, “If they [candidates] identified what they didn’t know, I also found that as an attractive trait because it showed some self-awareness.” Nominating committee members thought candidates with a growth mindset should first be able to identify who they currently were as a primary step before being able to grow as a leader.

While genuine candidates signaled self-awareness to nominating committees, introspective candidates demonstrated a willingness to grow through self-evaluation of strengths and areas of improvement. When asked what the ideal state officer candidate looks like, John, a 2017 past state officer, stated, “Tons of personal growth happened in that year [state officer year]. But if you’re not open to that commitment to grow, you’re going to struggle in that position. I think that was the first commandment-to grow.” If candidates were willing to grow, the next consideration was whether any lacking attributes could be taught. Nominating committees believed skills such as public speaking and organizational knowledge could always be taught to elected state officers, but traits like authenticity and compassion were deemed much harder to develop later if lacking in candidates. Julio, a 2019 past state officer, explained, “It’s so much easier for me, for the organization as a whole, to take a compassionate leader and teach them to be a good speaker than to take a good speaker and teach them to be an engaging leader.” Thus, while nominating committees believed genuine candidates must be willing to grow as leaders, the areas needing improvement must also be considered teachable.
Nominating committees also valued professionalism in candidates. When asked what behaviors affected selection, John, a 2017 past state officer, commented, “They had to balance the perfect amount of being personable, but at the same time, professional.” Professionalism was seen by nominating committees as having a direct connection to candidates holding themselves to high standards. A professional candidate was perceived as competent and qualified to serve as a role model and representative of the FFA. When asked about the value of the panel interview round, Savannah, a 2018 student member, mentioned how candidates could wear clothing other than FFA official dress during the panel interview as long as the clothing was still professional. She further explained, “State officers don't have time to slack off and kick back at some chapter event, because they're at work. That's their job. They have to be good role models no matter the situation.” Therefore, the nominating committees thought candidates should act and dress professionally, even when it was not a requirement. As role models, candidates were expected to hold themselves to high professional standards as representatives of Western State FFA.

Commitment as a Desirable Trait

The last trait sought in state officer candidates was commitment. Nominating committees viewed state office as a challenging year of service, and commitment was necessary for selected candidates to effectively lead the organization. In relation to candidates’ commitment, Julio, a 2019 past state officer, reflected on challenges he personally experienced in state office. He said, “Can you [candidates] handle spending over a hundred days at events and things? Can you handle frequently having to be in front of people and interacting with people right after doing 50 nights of driving?” Passion for the FFA demonstrated commitment to the nominating committees. Concerning the six traits listed in the Western State FFA officer study guide, commitment relates most closely to responsibility. Committed candidates were described by
nominating committees as individuals who were prepared for challenges during state office, persevered through difficult times, and always prioritized responsibilities in the FFA.

Quality preparation for the selection process was one indicator to nominating committees that candidates were passionate about the FFA organization and would remain committed throughout the duration of state office. Nominating committees discussed memorization in the public speaking round, well planned workshops in the facilitation round, and agricultural or FFA knowledge as ways to gauge quality preparation by candidates. Antiona, the 2019 nominating committee chair, elaborated on her expectations of prepared rounds. She said, “They [nominating committee] give you [candidate] most, if not all, the resources that you're going to need. If you still don't know anything about what you're talking about, okay, that one's on you.” Basically, if candidates had the opportunity to prepare for a round and did not appear to have done so through their execution, then nominating committees did not consider them committed. Nominating committees were also asked how they identified passion in state officer candidates, which again tied to perceived preparation. Tanya, a 2017 past state officer, said, “If they weren't prepared, then I knew that passion wasn't there, and they really didn't want this as bad as they said they did.” Unprepared candidates signaled to the nominating committees they might be unprepared as state officers if elected. Hugh, a 2018 student member, explained, “Those who simply weren't ready and who didn't put enough time in before coming to interviews, and that’s going to show how much effort they're going to put into state office.” Therefore, preparation demonstrated commitment to nominating committees.

Perseverance was another crucial indicator of passion and commitment to nominating committees. Bart, a 2018 past state officer, described the relationship between passion and perseverance, “There's a lot of waiting and it's passion that gets you through there [the selection
process]… and if they don't have that passion for the organization or the passion for wanting the position, they burn out through the process.” Passionate candidates were more likely to persevere through the seven-nominating committee rounds and nominating committee members saw this perseverance as reflective of their overall commitment to the FFA. Perseverance of candidates during the selection process was viewed by nominating committees to carry over into subsequent state office duties if elected.

The final indicator of commitment and passion of candidates was through the prioritization of FFA, especially during high school. Nominating committees valued the applications and recommendation letters, required by all state officer candidates, to gain a clear picture of past commitments and possible conflicts with FFA involvement. When asked how they determined if candidates were well-balanced in their commitments, Jocelyn, a 2018 student member, said she looked for candidates that, “would take advantage of as many opportunities as they could, but if there was a conflict between the two, that FFA was the priority.” Sports or academics were often seen as competing factors with FFA commitment, but priorities such as family and religion were viewed more favorably by nominating committee members. However, if any commitment impeded candidates’ perceived ability to lead, it was an area of concern for nominating committees. John, a 2017 past state officer, said, “They're [the candidate] super committed to, let's say, school or something, which isn't a bad thing. But for the role of state office, it isn't necessarily the best.” Overall, nominating committees wanted candidates to demonstrate commitment to FFA by prioritizing the organization over other activities and responsibilities.
Objectivity and Subjectivity of the Nominating Committee Selection Process

In addition to the nominating committees’ prioritization of traits, interviews and focus groups also revealed how nominating committees determined if candidates possessed the attributes sought. While the traits of selflessness, people skills, growth mindset, and commitment emerged from the data as key priorities for nominating committees, they are not currently identified in public documents by Western State FFA. Instead, the six traits of responsibility, problem-solving, character, teamwork/interaction, communication, and ambition are heavily utilized to guide the nominating committee during the entire selection process. During each of the seven interview rounds, nominating committees scored candidates on whether they possessed each trait. This trait focused scoring was described by nominating committee members as an attempt by the Western State FFA to provide guidance on decision making and maintain objectivity of nominating committee members. However, since the definition of the traits were open to interpretation, nominating committees also described a heavy reliance on subjective selection guided by personal interpretations and intuition. Throughout the interviews, nominating committee members claimed to value both objective selection (trait guided scoring) and subjective selection (personal interpretation and intuition) when selecting officers for Western State FFA.

Objectivity within the Selection Process

Most nominating committees believed the selection process should be largely directed by the six traits, to maintain objectivity. The six traits, while undefined in public documents, are introduced and defined orally during nominating committee training. When asked what was looked for in state officer candidates, Tristen, a 2019 past state officer, immediately said, “We learned about six characteristics of a state officer that our questions lead towards-communication, teamwork, involvement, ambition, problem-solving, character, and
responsibility.” For each of the seven rounds, nominating committee members received score sheets listing which of the six traits were being observed during the round. If the nominating committee member thought the candidate had the trait, they marked a three on the score sheet. If the nominating committee member did not think the candidate had the trait, they marked a one on the score sheet. Two’s were given when nominating committee members thought the candidate possessed the trait, but still had room for improvement.

For the panel interview and individual interview rounds, one public online document provides example questions for each of the six traits. For instance, when looking for teamwork and responsibility, a nominating committee member might ask, “Give me an example of a time when you faced a disagreement with an individual or on a team. What did you do correctly in the situation, and how could you have handled it better?” (Western State FFA, 2013, p. 4). When looking for communication, the question might be, “Give an example of when you had to present complex information in a simplified manner in order to explain it to others.” (Western State FFA, 2013, p. 7). During the focus groups and individual interviews, nominating committees were also asked what traits they did not want to see in state officer candidates. Antonia, the 2019 nominating committee chair, said, “It’s a lack of a trait, a character trait, rather than downright I don’t want this.” Since unwanted traits in candidates were not explicitly stated in public documents, the nominating committees felt most comfortable relying on the presence or absence of the six traits. Nominating committee chairs and past state officers more strictly adhered to the traits compared to the nominating committee student members. In general, nominating committees attempted to maintain objectivity by focusing on the six traits a state officer should possess (according to the state officer application and nominating committee training) and not on undesirable traits not clearly outlined in an official document.
It was also important to nominating committee members to keep external factors to the selection process excluded during candidate consideration for state office. External factors to the selection process included past experiences between nominating committee members and candidates, whether they were positive or negative. Bart, 2018 past state officer, described a negative experience he had with one of the candidates prior to the nominating committee process. He explained, “I knew that they had some negative attributes, but I never said anything, other than to maybe the other adults in the room.” When external factors were not considered during the process, the committee believed they took a step towards enhancing objectivity.

Fairness concerning internal factors was also important, with a focus on attempting to treat all candidates equally. If nominating committee members smiled at one candidate, they tried to smile at all candidates. Even feelings of compassion for a struggling candidate were commonly put aside in the name of fairness. Randy, a 2019 student member, described an instance where he was reminded to be fair when discussing a candidate who struggled with communication during the interview process:

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

As the Interviewee Framework posits, an interview is an intermediary component between interviewer and interviewee backgrounds (Huffcutt et al., 2011). An interviewer can only interpret the qualifications of an interviewee based on their own background and
through the lens of communication in the interview process, which is imperfect. Thus, while nominating committee members attempted to stick to the six traits, limit outside influences, and maintain fairness; no true objectivity could be achieved since the selection process is an interview between two subjective entities.

**Subjectivity within the Selection Process**

While objectivity was valued by nominating committees, subjectivity also played an important role in the process. The six traits outlined by Western State FFA were heavily utilized as a guide; however, the interpretation of these traits varied amongst nominating committee members. Multiple definitions of the traits emerged during focus groups and individual interviews and how nominating committees viewed evidence of these traits in candidates also varied. Character was the most discussed of the six traits. Anthony, a 2017 and 2018 past state officer, discussed the trait of character shown through a candidate making a difficult decision. He said, “Their [the candidate’s] friend trusted them with the secret, but that person betrayed the secret by telling an adult for the safety of their friend. So, I think that goes into ethics.” Another nominating committee member spoke of character demonstrated through honesty. Sandy, a 2019 student member, said, “If we think that they [candidate] seem to be hiding something with their answers, you can kind of tell when someone’s lying, when they’re giving answers in those situations. Character was fit in with all of the questions.”

There was little consistency concerning what the nominating committees considered the six traits to look like during the selection process; however, nominating committees valued the flexibility in perspectives. When asked what a genuine candidate looked like during selection, Julio, a 2019 past state officer, responded, “It is a subjective thing. It is an emotional thing. And I think that has to be that way because ultimately what we're choosing you [the candidate] for is a job that is largely dependent on subjective emotional interactions.” Nominating committee
members would often rely on their instincts over straightforward definitions of the traits to identify desirable attributes in state officer candidates. The Interviewee Framework (Huffcut et al., 2011) displays the subjectivity of interviewer ratings as a function of Interviewer Information Processing Effects, which includes biases. It also suggests interviewer personality within Interviewee and Interviewer Dynamics impacts the interview, so there are many ways in which the subjectivity of the interviewer impacts ratings. Hugh, a 2018 student member, discussed his use of instinct when discerning genuineness, “You can really see their eyes light up, and they're talking about this experience that they had and what they want to do during their year of service. And in other ones, you don't see that same spark.” Nominating committee members often remarked desirable leaders would have a “sparkle in their eye”, smile, or a “sense of excitement”. Others claimed, “it just felt right” or “they just knew”. Savannah, a 2018 student member, described using instinct when deciphering character in candidates, “I mean, just how they interacted with us. You can kind of just tell they're being honest.”

In addition to utilizing their instincts to guide the process, nominating committees also valued informal interactions to provide insight into candidate attributes. Tristen, a 2019 past state officer, elaborated, “I personally liked the little times when I would see them in the elevator or something like that. We weren't really supposed to communicate with them outside of that, but it just kind of naturally happened.” Statements such as these contradict the attempt to maintain objectivity by excluding factors external to the nominating committee selection process; however, nominating committees viewed interactions outside of the formal interview process to be more revealing of candidate attributes because they were not part of the interview rounds.

Intersection of Objectivity and Subjectivity

Overall, nominating committees valued the inclusion of both objectivity and subjectivity in the selection process. They viewed the six traits as a mechanism for maintaining some
objectivity, structure, and consistency during the process, but conversely expressed a need to allow individual subjectivity of nominating committee members to play a role in selection. Julio, a 2019 past state officer, provided more history on the current section process. He said, “Our current nominating committee process evolved out of a feeling years ago amongst advisors in the state that no one understood how officers were selected, and so we tried to create a new process so that everyone could understand.” The six traits were subsequently established to serve as guidelines for state officer candidates going through the selection process; however, nominating committees still retained the freedom to subjectively interpret the traits to select what they believed to be the best candidates.

Huffcutt’s Interviewee Framework (2011) best displays the intersection of subjectivity and objectivity. One section in the Interviewee Framework objectively impacts the interview- \textit{Interview Design Considerations}. More sections, however, subjectively impact the interview from the interviewers’ perspectives and backgrounds- \textit{Demographic/Personal Characteristics}, \textit{Interviewer Information Processing Effects}, and \textit{Interviewer and Interviewee Dynamics}. Objectivity and subjectivity contained in the Interviewee Framework were reflected by the nominating committees. While attempting to maintain objectivity, nominating committees adhered to the interview design and the training they received. Subjectivity was apparent through nominating committees’ reliance on interpretations and instinct during the state officer selection process. Furthermore, while most nominating committee members referenced or stated the guidance of the six traits in the process, an \textit{Interview Design Consideration} (Huffcutt et al., 2011), most of the interviews and focus groups were spent discussing the subjectivity of selection. Past state officers spent a little more time discussing and emphasizing the interview design, but eventually they too went on to talk about interactions and instinct. In the end, while
nominating committees attempted to objectively select state officers, subjective selection was mentioned more frequently and preferred by most.

**Nominating Committees’ Skepticism towards Selection Process**

While Western State FFA nominating committees were satisfied overall with the resulting state officers elected during their year(s) of service, many still voiced skepticism surrounding the selection process. Julio, a 2019 past state officer, stated, “I was not convinced the nominating committee process was very good.” At the same time, nominating committee members also claimed the selection process produced quality results, in the form of elected state officers. Bart, a 2018 past state officer, expressed this internal conflict, “There are things about it [the selection process] that I'm not super fond of, but at the same time, it's proven to be an effective process. I don't know if I would change anything about it.” Overall, nominating committee members were excited about the candidates they selected, but still thought that various aspects of the selection process could be improved. The most skepticism stemmed from the concept of interviewing as a performance and the opportunity for emotions to impact interviewee portrayal.

**Interviewing as a Performance**

In line with the Interviewee Framework (Huffcutt et al., 2011), nominating committee members viewed the interview process as an intermediary performance between the interviewee and interviewer, which was one reason why interactions outside of the selection process were highly valued. Boston, a 2017 student member, elaborated, “This is where [during interviews] we're seeing their best as a person. Some of them could be really good at putting on a show for us in that moment.” Candidates were viewed as being on their “best behavior” during selection rounds and nominating committees expressed concern that some candidates told them only “what
they thought they wanted to hear”. Nominating committee members worried that the selection rounds could misrepresent candidates due to their ability to perform to expectations.

Since the selection rounds were viewed as a performance, some nominating committee members suggested changes to increase authenticity of candidates. Catheryn, a 2017 student member, semi-jokingly said, “Planting a little camera in there [the holding room] because I think that shows those people that really are outgoing, hiding in the corner, or being fake. I think it shows their larger colors that we never get to see.” Nominating committees did realize such measures weren’t realistic in practice, but quotes like Catheryn’s surface the potential for interview rounds to be unrepresentative of candidates. Interviewing, both inside and outside of the Western State FFA Officer selection, was largely viewed as a biased process; however, behavioral interview questions were believed to contain the least bias by nominating committees. When asked how he could tell a candidate was committed, John, a 2017 past state officer, said, “There’s no perfect formula for that, but between looking at the application, talking to their past teachers, and some of those behavioral interviewing questions, it's our best try.”

While many of the traits could be addressed through behavioral interviewing techniques, nominating committee members believed teamwork was an area that was difficult to discern through behavioral interview questions alone. Many nominating committee members suggested having candidates interact with one another during an existing or additional interview round. Antonia, the 2019 nominating committee chair, elaborated, “You have to base it [teamwork] on the facilitation round and their interactions with nominating committee members. But how do they work with people that could potentially be their teammates? I think that would be really interesting to see.” Candidates were always interviewed independent of their potential
teammates, but nominating committees believed seeing them work together could provide further insight than simply asking them to describe their use of teamwork in past experiences.

*Emotions Impact Perception of Traits*

In addition to interviewing being a performance, nominating committees also expressed concern with how candidates’ emotions might impact the interviews and distract or misrepresent candidate attributes to the committee. In the Interviewee Framework (Huffcutt et al., 2011), emotions, such as anxiety and confidence, impact the interviewee’s performance as they are a part of the *Interviewee State Influences*. The most noticed emotion in candidates was nervousness. While the nominating committees believed a degree of nervousness indicated passion for state office, too much was viewed as detrimental because it distracted from other attributes. Savannah, a 2018 student member, discussed how nervousness can impact selection, “People [candidates] who were way, way too anxious about the whole process...You don't want to knock them for that, but at the same time we had candidates who couldn't even talk to us at some point.” Nominating committees typically expressed concern when presented with nervous candidates, as they did not want nerves to be a determining factor in selection. However, when nervousness blocked the candidate’s ability to communicate, the six traits and corresponding attributes were difficult to interpret for nominating committees.

Conversely, a lack of nervousness often resulted in candidates appearing to be over-confident or arrogant. Often a lack of nervousness was seen in state officer candidates who were past nominating committee members or were well-prepared. 2019 student member Sandy stated:

I believe for a few of the candidates who had served on nom com the previous year, that was arguably the reason why they were not selected, because they made it so apparent that they had been in our shoes before, and they knew what we were supposed to be looking for.
While candidates may have been polished and well prepared, any reference to being ready and knowing what to do during the interviews could have been misinterpreted by nominating committees as arrogance instead of experience. Thus, some amount of nervousness was seen by nominating committee members as better than no nerves at all.

Overall, the individual interviews, focus groups, and document analysis revealed what attributes nominating committees were looking for, how they determined candidates’ possession of those attributes, and inherent issues they observed with the current selection process. While the six traits helped to guide the process toward objectivity, nominating committees also valued subjectivity when selecting candidates. The committee members prioritized selflessness, people skills, growth mind-set, and commitment in state officer candidates and believed they ultimately elected the best candidates to meet those criteria. Still, nominating committees expressed reservations with the process being an interview, which included several factors influencing interviewee performance, and provided suggestions for refinement of the process in the form of a teamwork/interaction component.

Discussion

Nominating committees discussed traits looked for in candidates, identification of those traits, and skepticism with the current Western State FFA selection process. When discussing traits of state officer candidates, many nominating committee members referenced their personal leadership experiences and contextualized traits within the scope of the FFA organization. Specifically, past state officers on the nominating committee, pulled heavily from their prior experiences during state office. All the nominating committee members were associated with FFA through prior experiences and were consequently impacted by the leadership concepts taught within the organization. The Interviewee Framework demonstrates a relationship between
Demographics/Personal Characteristics of the interviewer(s) and the impact of these characteristics on the ratings of the interviewee(s) (Huffcutt et al., 2011). Nominating committees past experiences with FFA contributed to their understanding of what a state officer should be and how they should act. Thus, the perspectives of nominating committee members may result in Western State FFA selecting state officers who are so enveloped in FFA culture, background, and traditions that they are less likely to instigate change. According to Yukl (2010), instigating change is one of the most important responsibilities of leadership. If the Western State FFA values leaders who can instigate change, it may be useful to consider the background and culture of selected leaders. Additionally, it may prove valuable for Western State FFA to include nominating committee members who are not as heavily impacted by an FFA background, which could produce more diverse future state officers and reach a larger variety of members statewide.

The Youth Leadership Framework contains the presence of four domains (cognitive, motivational, affective, and behavioral) all anchored within the fifth, ethical domain (Sherif, 2019). The four emergent traits valued by the nominating committees largely aligned with the Youth Leadership Framework. Various components of selflessness, growth mindset, people skills, and commitment can be attributed to each of the first four domains and all tie back to the ethical domain. Since ethics can impact the ability of a leader to influence the group (Northouse, 2012), it is important for Western State FFA nominating committees to include the four traits that emerged from this study in future iterations of nominating committee selection.

Additionally, since ethics is an integral component of both Sherif’s (2019) Youth Leadership Framework and the four emergent traits from this study, it should also be integrated into the six traits listed in the online document for Western State FFA officers (character,
ambition, teamwork/interaction, problem-solving, communication, and responsibility). While character may be considered an ethical trait, it is currently separate from the other five traits listed by Western State FFA as opposed to a more integrated approach. For example, problem solving does not indicate whether a problem was solved according to ethical standards, it only implies the ability to efficiently solve a problem. Western State FFA should consider either revising the six traits to include an ethical component within each trait, or they could also change the training to incorporate character into the other five traits. Given the four emerging traits in this study were important to three years of nominating committees, and include the ethical domain present in Sherif’s (2019) Youth Leadership Framework, they would be valid substitutions or additions to the current six traits.

Further revision of the six traits is also warranted since there is no solidified definition used consistently by nominating committees across a three-year timespan. Nominating committee members attempted to maintain objectivity by using the six traits as a guiding framework, especially the past state officers and nominating committee chairs. However, subjectivity played a critical role in selection, as the six traits were interpreted differently by various members on the nominating committees. To ensure increased clarity on the six traits, or any guiding factors in the selection process, Western State FFA needs to solidify definitions, examples, and practices to be thoroughly taught to the nominating committee members prior to commencing the state officer selection process. The Interviewee Framework posits Interview Design Considerations can impact the performance of interviewees and the corresponding interviewer(s) ratings (Huffcutt et al., 2011). While changing the background, experiences, culture, biases, and other personal factors of either the interviewer(s) or interviewee(s) is challenging; the interview design is the most easily changed component of the Interviewee
Framework. By further solidifying the traits guiding the selection process, Western State FFA could increase the consistency of nominating committee member interpretations of traits and consequently the consistency of state officers elected.

While Interview Design Considerations directly impact the interview, another component within the Interviewee Framework to be considered by Western State FFA is Supplemental Preparation. Supplemental Preparation includes interview trainings and experiences of the interviewee(s) and interviewer(s) (Huffcutt et al., 2011). If definitions and clarification of the six traits are provided to the nominating committees, then definitions and clarification of the traits should also be provided to the state officer candidates prior to the interview process. While nominating committees did view interviewing as a performance and clarification of the traits may enhance the performing of state officer candidates during the interviews, clarity of the traits will also allow state officer candidates with a growth mindset to be able to strive towards quality leadership within the FFA. The Authentic Leadership Framework stresses leaders to intrinsically consider who they are and be willing to grow (Kiersch & Peters, 2015), which aligns well with the emerging attribute of growth mindset sought by nominating committees in this study. Candidates who receive definitions and clarity of the traits before the interview are given more opportunity to grow and develop into the state officer candidate desired by the nominating committees.

Concerning a growth mindset, the National FFA mission highlights the personal growth of its members (National FFA, 2020). Nominating committees desired leaders to be genuine and honest about where they were as individuals, and then seek opportunities to grow. Kiersch and Peters (2015) discuss the combination of an Authentic Leadership Framework and the Servant Leadership Framework for leadership instruction using experiential learning. Authentic
Leadership stresses leaders to intrinsically consider who they are as leaders and be willing to grow (Kiersch & Peters, 2015), which combines well with the growth mindset trait. Nominating committee members saw the development of self, intrinsic, to be just as important as selflessness, extrinsic. Thus, adapting this study to use a combination of the authentic and servant leadership frameworks may prove insightful for future Western FFA nominating committees. This is substantiated through the literature which highlights that intrinsic qualities, such as self-regulation, have been shown to correlate with positive youth development (Lerner & Lerner, 2013). Future Western State nominating committees are encouraged to consider a combination of Kiersch and Peters’ (2015) Authentic Leadership Framework and Servant Leadership Framework as a guiding conceptual framework for state office selection.

When describing the process of selecting candidates, a complicated relationship between objectivity and subjectivity emerged from nominating committees when selecting leaders. It was important for nominating committees that the selection process maintain a subjective component as they identified various benefits to subjective selection. Leadership in the Leader-Member Exchange theory emphasizes the interactions between leaders and followers (Northouse, 2017), and the Western State FFA nominating committee process is a leader-member interaction. FFA is a student led organization (National FFA, 2020), and nominating committees believed the student perspective should be prioritized over objectivity. While the traits and process are outlined to provide an objective understanding and framework to guide the process, the subjective interpretation of the traits allowed flexibility in selecting leaders best suited for the task of state office.

**Recommendations**

The following recommendations are suggested as Western State FFA continues with electing state officers through a nominating committee process. The first recommendation fits
into the current interview structure and corresponding six traits, while the later recommendations require more drastic changes to the nominating committee process.

First, teamwork/interaction needs to be better addressed during the interview rounds. Interactions inside of the interview rounds and outside of the interview rounds were both considered valuable by the nominating committees, but nominating committees did not believe they were able to accurately address teamwork interactions among the candidates since all the rounds are completed individually. Nominating committee chairs had the chance to see interactions among the state officer candidates in the holding rooms, but the entirety of the nominating committee did not have the same opportunity. Teamwork/interaction is currently one of the six traits listed by Western State FFA (2020), and nominating committee members believed it could be better addressed during the selection process. The opportunity to address teamwork and interaction is already available in the optional seventh committee’s choice round, so it may be prudent for future nominating committee chairs to have candidates complete the seventh round together to show their ability to perform as a team. Due to the flexibility of the seventh round, addressing teamwork/interaction in this way would fit into the current interview structure.

Should Western State FFA nominating committees value the flexibility of the optional seventh round, an additional interview round to address teamwork/interaction would be another viable option. Adding an additional round, however, would be a more drastic change to the interview process. Either way, the nominating committees involved in this study viewed interviewing as a performance and valued interactions with candidates more than answers to interview questions. Thus, adding a round to view interactions among multiple candidates would
address one of the six traits (teamwork/interaction) and address the nominating committees’ distaste for performance seen in other interview rounds.

In addition to addressing teamwork and interaction differently, nominating committees should also provide constructive feedback to candidates following selection of state officers. Nominating committees valued candidates with a growth mindset, which means they were genuine, intrinsic, and professional. Before a candidate can grow as a leader, they must know their strengths and areas for improvement. The FFA claims to develop each member’s premier leadership, personal growth, and career success in its mission statement (National FFA, 2020), and Western State FFA can hold true to the FFA mission statement by providing constructive criticism for the purpose of personal growth to all state officer candidates. Not all notes from the nominating committee should be provided for candidate review, but some amount of feedback will help candidates with a growth mindset to further develop as leaders, regardless if they are elected as a Western FFA state officer.

For further research, an examination of how nominating committee members are selected would provide further insight into Western State FFA’s state officer selection process. While this study examined how Western State FFA nominating committees determined quality leadership, it was apparent that nominating committee selection was impacted by the nominating committee members, their culture, and their past experiences. The Interviewee Framework (Huffcutt et al., 2011) posits the interviewer’s past experiences have an impact on the outcome of an interview. By examining the nominating committee structure and makeup, Western State FFA will have further insight on who is selecting state officers and how the nominating committees themselves are selected, which is not currently as well structured as the state officer selection process. To investigate the nominating committee, a longitudinal study of the Western State nominating
committee should be implemented. The investigator should act as an observer during nominating committee selection, planning for interviews, training, and the actual state officer selection process. By observing the process in real time, the investigator would benefit from first-hand experience. A further recommendation is to study and compare FFA nominating committee processes in multiple other states. Best practices could be pulled and combined from various State FFA Associations to further enhance nominating committee practices within FFA and other student leadership organizations.
## Appendix A

**Focus Group Protocol**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component of Youth Leadership Framework</th>
<th>BG- Why did you decide to serve on the nominating committee?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Attributes in general that nominating committees look for. Can place them into domains later. | 1. Describe the ideal state officer candidate  
   a. What qualities or attributes should they possess?  
   b. What qualities or attributes (if any) should they not possess? |
| Attributes falling under the **cognitive domain** of the youth leadership framework. | 2. What role (if any) does knowledge of leadership have on a candidate’s success?  
   a. Knowledge of FFA?  
   b. Knowledge of agriculture industry?  
   3. How do you determine if a candidate has knowledge through the interview process? |
| Attributes falling under the **motivational domain** of the youth leadership framework. | 4. What role (if any) does motivation have on a candidate’s success?  
   5. How do you determine if a candidate is motivated through the interview process? |
| Attributes falling under the **affective domain** of the Youth Leadership Framework. | 6. What role (if any) does attitude have on a candidate’s success?  
   7. How do you determine a candidate’s attitude through the interview process?  
   8. What emotions displayed by a candidate (if any) would benefit them during the interview process? |
| Attributes falling under the **behavioral domain** in the Youth Leadership Framework. | 9. What role (if any) do behaviors have on a candidate’s success?  
   a. What types of behaviors are you looking for? |
| Attributes falling under the **ethics domain** in the Youth Leadership Framework. | 10. What role (if any) do ethics have on a candidate’s success?  
   11. How do you determine a candidate’s ethics during the interview process? |
| Components of the interview process | 12. What is the value of the exam in the state officer selection process?  
a. writing exercise?  
b. greetings round (public speaking)?  
c. one-on interview?  
d. panel interview?  
e. facilitation activity?  
f. ag issues conversation?  
g. ag education conversation?  
h. optional committee choice?  
i. election speeches?  
| 13. Are there any other items that you consider when selecting a state FFA officer? |
## Appendix B

**One-on-One Interview Protocol**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component of Youth Leadership Framework</th>
<th>Questions Asked</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Overall                                | 1. What was your role in the nominating committee?  
                                      | 2. How did your individual role fit into the overall officer selection process? |
| Cognitive Domain                       | 3. How did knowledge of leadership affect selection?  
                                      | 4. What perceptions of leadership benefitted candidates during the nominating committee process? |
| Motivational Domain                    | 5. What amount of passion towards leadership was important for success during the process?  
                                      | 6. What reasons did selected candidates have for running for the leadership positions? |
| Affective Domain                       | 7. What emotions expressed by candidates during the process affected selection?  
                                      | 8. What attitudes affected the selection of candidates? |
| Behavioral Domain                      | 9. What actions taken by candidates during the interview process affected selection? |
| Ethical Domain                         | 10. What ethical decisions were made by candidates during nominating committee and how did it affect selection? |
| Overall                                | 11. Would you change anything about the current selection process?  
                                      | a. If so, what?  
                                      | b. Why? |
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