The Power of Social Capital: A Case Study of the Louisiana State University AgCenter’s Agricultural Leadership Development Program

Andrew Schade
Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge

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THE POWER OF SOCIAL CAPITAL: A CASE STUDY OF THE LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY AGCENTER’S AGRICULTURAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in The Department of Agricultural and Extension Education and Evaluation

by

Andrew Schade
B.A., The Catholic University of America, 2010
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Abstract

The Louisiana State University Agricultural Center’s Agricultural Leadership Development Program (LSU AgCenter ALDP) is a two-year nonformal education program for participants connected to various aspects of the agricultural and natural resources sectors. The purpose of the study was to describe the perspectives of graduates of the LSU AgCenter ALDP since 2005 regarding their self-reported outcomes after completing the program. The study used a qualitative, instrumental case study design, based on 12 semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis. The study employed adult learning theory and social capital theory as the theoretical frameworks to understand the impact of the program on participants. Three main themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) broadened perspective and understanding of various aspects of agriculture, politics, economics, and global issues; (2) networking and relationship building among classmates, alumni, and industry leaders; and (3) mindset shift toward leadership, which includes increased confidence, advocacy, participation, and responsibility. The study concluded that the LSU AgCenter ALDP developed leaders who were prepared to navigate a globally integrated agricultural system, who were confident and effective communicators, and who were involved in the social, economic, and political systems to improve their enterprises and communities, largely fulfilling the stated goals of the program.
Chapter 1. Introduction

From 1965 through 1972, 150 farmers in Michigan participated in a unique experiential learning program in rural leadership development. Professors at Michigan State University (MSU) created the program funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (Miller, 1976). John A. Hannah, president of MSU for 28 years, recalled it as “one of the most outstanding programs on the MSU campus during my tenure” (Miller, 1976, p. 3). The immense success of this initial leadership development program, focused on agriculture and people from rural communities, echoes in the numerous programs of similar focus and structure across the country today. Although there is interaction between programs and the existence of an international association, agricultural leadership development programs (ALDPs) have functioned independently in many states (Lamm et al., 2016). The structure, curriculum, and participant demographics of these programs have varied but each has, even 50 years later, been inspired by the extraordinary success of the program at MSU.

Statement of the Problem

To date, there have been no publications in academic journals, neither qualitative nor quantitative, about the LSU AgCenter’s ALDP. Overall, very little published research has been advanced about this particular program. One exception to this was Abington-Cooper’s (2005) dissertation, which was a quantitative study of participants in the LSU AgCenter ALDP from 1988-2004.

Abington-Cooper’s (2005) study evaluated the effectiveness of the program, especially regarding whether alumni of the program were increasing their leadership skills and had become more involved in the agricultural industry as well as in their community because of the program. She reported positive impacts for program participants regarding communication ability,
relationships with others, and understanding how issues in Louisiana agriculture were related to local, state, national, and international issues. Further, Abington-Cooper (2005) reported that participants took action to advocate for themselves in agricultural and non-agricultural groups.

Responses from participants related to outcomes of the program aligned with the stated goals of the LSU AgCenter ALDP. Abington-Cooper (2005) recommended additional research related to the cause-and-effect relationship of the program and increased leadership competencies, including the implementation of a pre- and post-assessment of participants. In an industry marked both by historical roots and increasing globalization, a need emerged to continue examining the outcomes of graduates of the program. Despite this, however, little has been published about the program’s successes since Abington-Cooper’s (2005) study – a significant problem when, in the intervening 18 years, hundreds of participants have completed the LSU AgCenter ALDP.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study was to describe the perspectives of graduates of the LSU AgCenter’s ALDP since 2005 regarding their self-reported outcomes after completing the two-year program.

**Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. To what extent does the LSU AgCenter ALDP develop leaders who are prepared to navigate a globally integrated agricultural system?

2. To what extent does the LSU AgCenter ALDP develop leadership skills and awareness in participants, so they become confident, effective communicators?
3. To what extent does the LSU AgCenter ALDP develop participant understanding and involvement in the social, economic, and political systems to improve their enterprises and communities?

**Assumptions of the Study**

I made the following assumptions for the purposes of this study:

1. The LSU AgCenter ALDP graduates answered my questions truthfully and completely.
2. The LSU AgCenter ALDP graduates, considering that many years had elapsed since program participation, recalled to the best of their ability, their memories about their perspective prior to, during, and after completing the program.
3. I maintain that some biases existed in relation to the subject because of employment-related professional relationships with program staff and some study participants.

**Significance of the Study**

This study will provide evidence of the impact of the LSU AgCenter’s ALDP on participants. Formative evaluation of the program by participants occurred regularly to ensure staff can appropriately modify and adapt future curricula. However, there has been little formal evaluation of the program’s impacts on the participants regarding their outcomes and behavior changes. Miller (1976), in the original Kellogg Farmer Study Program report, emphasized the importance of evaluation while acknowledging the difficulty in measuring long-term impacts. Despite this, Lamm et al. (2013) argued that documentation of programmatic outcomes in Extension was necessary to maintain the support of administrators. Abington-Cooper’s (2005) study created a basis for some of the key outcomes gained by graduates of the LSU AgCenter’s ALDP during its first 16 years. The current study, employing a different methodology, built on
Abington-Cooper’s (2005) work to document the program’s impact further. In addition, this study also had the potential to inspire improvements to the program’s structure and curriculum.

**Limitations of the Study**

1. I did not invite or intend to interview all the graduates of the program during the period being studied. As such, the perceptions of interview participants about the program may not reflect the perceptions of all alumni of the program.

2. This study, due to its qualitative nature, did not seek to make generalizations. Instead, we provided a thick, rich description to promote the transferability of the findings to similar programs.

3. The opinions expressed by participants during their interview reflect their perception at the time of the interview but may be biased by their current connection with the researcher, program leadership, and alumni.

4. Significant time had elapsed since program participation for some study participants, and recalling their perceived situation before, during, and after the program, may have been difficult.

**Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the researcher has defined the following terms:

- **Agricultural Leadership Development Program (ALDP)** – a nonformal education program of participants, connected to various aspects of the agricultural and natural resources sectors, who desire to increase their leadership abilities (Strickland, 2011).

- **LSU AgCenter** – The Louisiana State University Agricultural Center (LSU AgCenter) is one of eight campuses of the Louisiana University System, the Land-Grant University in Louisiana with a mission to facilitate quality teaching, extension, and research.
• Leadership – Modern scholarship about leadership provides a conception that is beyond traits or behaviors of an individual. Northouse (2022) defined leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 6).

• Outcome – programmatic outcomes describe short-, medium-, or long-term changes in behavior of participants which are influenced by the program but for which the program does not have direct control (Bamberger et al., 2012).

• Curriculum – relative to ALDPs, curriculum refers broadly to the topics and experiences of the program participants.

• Social Capital Theory – the concept that a relationship between individuals has built within it, resources, which are available as a result of the relationship (Hauberer, 2011).

• Adult Learning Theory – scholars continue to develop this theory, but generally, it seeks to explain how and why adults learn differently than children (Merriam et al., 2007).
Chapter 2. Review of Literature

This chapter summarized the historical foundations of ALDPs originating from the Kellogg Farmers Study Program in the 1950s. The LSU AgCenter ALDP was influenced by this early work and a brief history was provided along with programmatic goals, curriculum, and scope – elements that largely remain unchanged since the program’s creation. Significant attention was directed toward the outcomes of ALDPs as documented in the published literature. The outcomes were linked to two theoretical frameworks utilized by this study: (a) adult learning theory and (b) social capital theory.

History and Background of Agricultural Leadership Development Programs

Appreciating the importance and breadth of today’s land-grant universities requires an understanding of not only their founding with the Morrill Act in 1862, but also the acts that followed: (a) Hatch Act, (b) the Morrill Act of 1890, and (c) Smith-Lever Act (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). The various legislation passed over six decades gradually established and funded the organizational structure for public universities that specialize in agricultural and mechanical arts to carry out their three-fold mission of teaching, research, and extension. ALDPs in many states have been connected to the land-grant university because they have been a natural fit with the agricultural extension mission.

ALDPs were first established in Michigan with Dr. Arthur Mauch’s public policy professional development in the 1950s focused on production agriculture, as well as both community and international issues (Miller, 1976). His sessions focused on developing participants’ networking abilities, communication skills, and political knowledge, taking a liberal arts approach. His success led to the interest of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation in developing formalized programs to create leaders in agriculture during the 1960s. (Howell et al., 1982). The
Kellogg Farmer Study Program engaged Michigan farmers in a three-year leadership development program funded by the Kellogg Foundation and organized by Michigan State University. Participants in the program were chosen because of their interest and potential to be leaders in Michigan agriculture. The liberal arts curriculum engaged participants in the political, social, and economic aspects of agriculture, ranging from local to international. The delivery method of the educational program focused on participation in multi-week seminars that included lectures, discussions, observations, interviews, and assigned readings. Each year also included a seminar for the wives of participants. The second and third years of the Kellogg Program included national and international travel seminars (Miller, 1976). The program of study was rigorous, and the time commitment was significant. Based on the initial success of the Kellogg Program, numerous additional agricultural-based leadership development programs began in other states, some of which also received funding from the Kellogg Foundation.

**LSU AgCenter ALDP**

Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College was founded in 1860 in Pineville, Louisiana, as the Louisiana State Seminary. After a fire in 1869, the campus relocated to Baton Rouge (Louisiana State University, 2020). In 1971, a comprehensive study of the Louisiana State University System by its Board of Supervisors recommended that the Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service “have an identity separate from that of the existing campuses” (LSU AgCenter, 2023b). In 1972, the Board of Supervisors formally established the Center for Agricultural Studies and Rural Development, which was renamed the Louisiana State University Agricultural Center in 1982 (LSU AgCenter, 2023b). Today known simply as the LSU AgCenter, it remains a campus of the Louisiana State
University System and shares some facilities with the LSU A&M campus in Baton Rouge, the state’s flagship and land-grant university.

The LSU AgCenter’s Agricultural Leadership Development Program (LSU AgCenter ALDP) began in 1988 under the leadership of Dr. Robert R. Soileau, an LSU AgCenter professor and father of the current director, Dr. Robert J. “Bobby” Soileau. Establishment of the LSU AgCenter ALDP was approved by LSU AgCenter Chancellor, Dr. H. Rouse Caffey in the mid-1980s after the General Manager of the American Sugar Cane League, Pete deGravelles pitched the idea of establishing such a program. Large cast bronze plaques [Plaque with background information about LSU AgCenter ALDP] (n.d.), adorn the walls of the main LSU AgCenter administrative building, J. Norman Efferson Hall. The plaque dedicated to the first class includes this summary:

The Louisiana State University Agricultural Center’s Leadership Development Program was initiated in January 1988 to develop young leaders in Louisiana agriculture, forestry and agribusiness. The program offers emerging leaders an opportunity to gain invaluable insight into the complexity of converging national and international policies that affect their lives.

At the time, the program sought to address four major issues within agriculture: (1) increasing average age of farmers, (2) decline of farm population, (3) growing urban population disconnected from agriculture, and (4) a globally-connected economy (Abington-Cooper, 2005). Thirty-five years later, these major issues continued to be relevant and perhaps more pronounced. The LSU AgCenter ALDP (LSU AgCenter, 2023c, para. 1) outlined the goals created in 1988 which remain the goals of the program today:

- Develop leaders who understand and prepare for global influences and opportunities.
• Develop leadership skills and awareness in participants so they become confident, effective communicators.

• Develop participant understanding and involvement in the social, economic and political systems to improve their enterprises and communities.

The current director of the LSU AgCenter ALDP is Dr. Robert J. “Bobby” Soileau, son of the founding director. He has served in this role since 2007 and is the fifth program director. Abington-Cooper (2005) served as assistant director of the LSU AgCenter ALDP and noted the following performance objectives of the program:

• to enhance their understanding of agriculture and the food system and their interrelationship on local, state, regional, and international levels
• to broaden their perspectives on major issues facing urban and rural Louisiana and the economy
• to increase and broaden their understanding of U.S. economic, environmental, political, and social systems
• to improve their leadership and communication skills
• to develop opportunities for networking
• to foster consensus-building and teamwork approaches to problem-solving
• to increase their ability, desire, and commitment to involve themselves in seeking solutions to today’s problems and anticipating tomorrow’s needs.

Participants

The LSU AgCenter ALDP has maintained its emphasis on supporting the agricultural industry of Louisiana and the first requirement is that participants be working in some aspect of agriculture. In Louisiana, the dominant sectors of agriculture include row crop farming,
livestock, forestry, aquaculture, and commercial fisheries. The program also accepts individuals working in agricultural-related industries such as farm equipment sales, crop consulting, and banking. Each class often includes a few agricultural researchers, extension agents, or other employees of the LSU AgCenter. The program does not have an age requirement or restriction and instead focuses on accepting applicants who have experience working in the agricultural industry and still have significant years to utilize the benefits of the program.

The initial classes of the LSU AgCenter ALDP accepted more than 30 participants. Under the direction of Dr. Robert J. “Bobby” Soileau, each class has accepted 25 participants and generally 22 to 25 participants graduate. Since 1988, and including Class XVII which graduated in February 2023, a total of 466 participants have completed the program. There are many notable graduates who have served or are serving in local and state government as elected or appointed officials. Other graduates lead agricultural companies, commodity-focused organizations, and have leadership positions in the Louisiana Farm Bureau Federation.

**Curriculum**

Much like the original Kellogg Farmers Study Program, the LSU AgCenter ALDP curriculum is delivered to participants though a series of seminars, which includes classroom instruction and field studies. The program lasts two years, as has been the case since the first class. The only exception has been Class XVIII, which occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic and delayed its international travel trip and graduation to early 2023. Each class participates in three travel experiences. During the first year the group participates in a U.S.-based tour. During the second year there are two travel experiences, Washington, D.C. to meet with federal officials, and a multi-week international trip. The three-day seminars occur in January, February, October,
and December, consisting of lectures, visits to local agricultural producers and businesses, and class discussions. The topics covered during these seminars as well as the travel experiences are:

- leadership skill building
- effective communication
- emerging technology
- environmental issues
- agricultural research
- public policy
- economic development
- agricultural trade and global competition (LSU AgCenter, 2023a, para. 2).

Abington-Cooper (2005) summarized the curriculum as broadly containing topics related to policy, leadership competencies, and global economics. During the application process, participants are required to commit in writing to attending all seminars and both their spouse and employer are required to consent to the attendance policy.

**Funding for the Program**

Participants in the LSU AgCenter ALDP are required to pay a tuition of $2,250 in addition to providing their own transportation to seminars. Some meals during the seminars and travel experiences are paid by the program. Often the program tuition has been paid by the company or organization where the participant works. The tuition does not represent the actual cost of participation and has been defrayed by support from the LSU AgCenter and private donations. The salary for the director and program specialist has historically been paid by the LSU AgCenter.
A main source of funding for the LSU AgCenter ALDP is the Chalkley Family Endowed Chair, which is held by the Vice President for Agriculture, presently Dr. Matt Lee. Proceeds from the endowment are used to support the program. During the first few years of the program there were significant budget constraints. To ensure the continuation of the LSU AgCenter ALDP, Laura Leach, her husband Buddy, and her brother Henry Chalkley Alexander made a significant gift to endow the program (Extraordinary Impacts, 2016). Today the Chalkley Family Chair remains one of the largest endowments at the LSU AgCenter. The precedent for private support set by the Chalkley Family continued and today the program has three additional perpetual endowments: H. Rouse Caffey LSU Agricultural Leadership Program endowment, Robert R. Soileau Ag Leadership Scholarship Fund, and the Ag Leaders of Louisiana Endowment Fund. Additionally, the LSU AgCenter ALDP conducts an annual appeal to alumni of the program (LSU AgCenter, 2023d). The financial stability of the program has been one reason why it has continued uninterrupted for more than 35 years.

**Outcomes for Participants in Leadership Development Programs**

Measuring and documenting the impact of Extension programs has become imperative. Much of the programing in Extension has been accomplished in part through federal funding from the Smith-Lever Act. Other sources include state funding, local government support or even private funding. Regardless of the source of funding, someone, either internal to Extension, or as part of external oversight, has an interest in knowing whether the funding is being properly stewarded, in other words, are the desired outcomes being achieved? Federal reporting requirements notwithstanding, in an era of stagnant or decreasing funding, demonstrating the outcomes and impact of Extension programs such as ALDPs has become critical to continued
financial and administrative support from the sponsoring organization (Lamm et al., 2013).
There are examples of ALDPs across the country that have ended due to financial constraints.

Demonstrating the impact of Extension programs for the sake of financial sustainability is a relevant motivating factor, but also important is the intrinsic value of an Extension program like an ALDP. Most ALDPs, as part of the Land-Grant University, have been considered an Extension program and as such, must align with the overall mission of the Cooperative Extension Service. From its earliest days, Extension focused on meeting the needs of people in their local communities. ALDPs must meet the needs of the participants, and the program overall must achieve the goals of the sponsoring organization (McClure et al., 2012; Yang et al., 2009).

Measuring the outcomes of ALDPs has largely occurred haphazardly. There has been no established method or instrument for evaluating ALDPs. To address the lack of research in leadership development program outcomes, Black and Earnest (2009) used the EvaluLEAD framework of Grove et al. (2007) to create a comprehensive evaluation instrument called Leadership Program Outcomes Measure (LPOM). They suggested using LPOM to evaluate the impact of ALDPs on participants and to help guide the leadership to administer ALDPs. According to the EvaluLEAD model, outcomes of leadership development programs can be categorized into three domains: individual, organization, and community. The LPOM instrument uses both open-ended and summated items and a Likert-type scale. The data gathered through the LPOM instrument provides opportunities for analysis and measuring impact but, without a single funder, or umbrella organization, or mandate from an association, implementing LPOM or any other standard evaluation process across all ALDPs remains a challenge. Despite the lack of a common evaluation tool, researchers have recorded a number of similar outcomes as reported by participants in ALDPs.
Kellogg Farmer Study Program Outcomes

It is important to remember that all ALDPs have, in some way, been related to the Kellogg Farmer Study Program at Michigan State University. At the outset of that leadership development initiative, the main goal was to accelerate the development of leaders through an organized program (Miller, 1976). According to Miller (1976) the program had two main objectives: “(a) to create a better understanding of the economic, political and social framework of American society and (b) to apply this understanding to the complex problems and unique concerns of agriculture and rural communities” (p. 6).

To achieve these goals, the Kellogg program relied on six approaches oriented towards the desired outcomes among program participants. First, participants needed a greater understanding of the issues facing society. To broaden their understanding and perspective, the program implemented study of the humanities and social sciences, such as world religions, political science, history, and art. The second area of development was related to problem solving. Participants built a knowledge base and then applied the skills and concepts of debate, inquiry, and communication. Building upon the previous, the third area of emphasis was critical thinking. It relied on an expanded understanding of other people and cultures. With an open-mindedness, and the new understanding of the social sciences, developing the skill of critical thinking was aimed at improving participants’ ability to make informed decisions. The next objective of the Kellogg program centered around helping participants understand the issues facing agriculture and rural communities in Michigan because of local, state, nation, and international policy. With newfound skills and understanding the fifth initiative was related to action and participation in leadership roles. The program provided the tools needed to be a leader but attaining a leadership role in an organization or in one’s community was left to the personal
decision of the participant. The final outcome of the Kellogg program was to create life-long learners (Miller, 1976). Measuring the impact on participants involved soliciting qualitative feedback. Miller (1976) noted the following summary:

Are they better farmers, better leaders, better husbands and fathers, better men because of their program participation? Almost anyone involved directly in this unique program would respond unequivocally [sic] yes! Outcomes were not universal in all farmers, of course. Nor was uniform growth exhibited. But change did occur (p. 39).

The hallmarks of the Kellogg program are evident in the ALDPs of today. Through a time-limited program, participants are educated and formed to become better leaders in agriculture.

**Increasing Knowledge, Building Relationships, and Gaining Social Capital**

As an educational program, ALDPs at a basic level seek to impart new knowledge to participants. Although many participants would be considered experts in their specific field within the agricultural industry, they often know a lot less about other aspects of agriculture. Kaufman et al. (2010) noted that the agricultural industry has been changing and people who work in it need to understand the how and why of the changes so that they are able to make good decisions. In a similar fashion, Abington-Cooper (2005) explained that a goal of the LSU AgCenter’s ALDP was to help participants understand the forces that affect agriculture. She reported that alumni of the program do have a better understanding of the internal and external forces at play. The international aspect of agriculture adds an additional layer to ALDP curriculum and outcomes. Many ALDPs, including the LSU AgCenter ALDP, take participants on an international travel experience. Both the preparation before and experience during the trip helps participants to gain knowledge of other cultures which is important perspective when working in an increasingly globalized industry (Diem & Nikola, 2005). Although related to a formal education course for undergraduates in leadership, Moore et al. (2009) found that the
combination of helping students understand globalization and develop cultural competence was critical to creating globally minded leaders. The increase of knowledge desired by ALDPs was focused on allowing the participant to appreciate their area of agriculture relative to the entire agricultural industry.

An informal and more organic part of developing knowledge and perspective comes from the relationship building that occurs among participants of ALDPs. It is important for ALDPs to span all sectors of the agricultural industry (Kaufman et al., 2012). Programs utilizing a cohort tend to introduce people who would not ordinarily have the opportunity to interact. The learning activities in which participants engage, such as seminars, tours, and discussions, help to form the social relationships that result from program participation (Black & Earnest, 2009). Developing relationships among ALDP participants is necessary and these relationships both provide advantage to individuals and the growth for the industry writ large through a system of networking (Kaufman et al., 2010, 2012). Russon and Reinelt (2004) found that a powerful and enduring outcome of ALDPs was the relationships built among classmates.

Some researchers prefer to speak about the importance of relationship building among ALDP participants as networking opportunities. The networking that creates the relationship was not the outcome of the program. They see networking as related to other outcomes such as improving personal skills and related to team building skills (Strickland, 2011; Carter & Rudd, 2000; Earnest, 1996; Whent & Leising, 1992). Strickland (2011) viewed ALDPs as having several related outcomes; for example, he argued they created networks of leaders who through their interaction and participation improve their networking skills, relationship skills, and team building skills. Strickland (2011) also noted that some ALDPs have the added feature of building a connected network of alumni from all cohorts. The LSU AgCenter’s ALDP created an alumni
association in 1991 to initiate connection between its inaugural and second classes (Abington-Cooper, 2005).

Networks and relationships are critical features of social capital theory. Some researchers assert that development of social capital has been one of the main outcomes of leadership development programs (Day, 2000; McCallum & O’Connell, 2009; Meehan & Reinelt, 2012). Burbaugh and Kaufman (2017) explored the connection between the learning activities of ALDPs and the outputs of networking ability and social capital creation. They found that focusing on programmatic inputs that help participants build relationships and improve their networking ability has the result of growing a participants’ social capital.

**Communication Skills for Advocacy**

Understanding the political system and developing communication skills were both goals of the original Kellogg program and remain an important part of ALDP curriculum. Participants in ALDPs reflect on the need to be able to communicate effectively with individuals and in a group or presentation setting, especially in agriculture (Kaufman et al., 2010). Communication skills includes both verbal communication, as described previously, and nonverbal skills such as listening and letter writing. Other communication skills can be also classified as business skills such as question asking and negotiation skills (Strickland, 2011). Brue and Brue (2016) discussed the importance of developing participants’ confidence and persuasion skills in a women’s leadership program. Although true for all leaders, women in a particular way, must find their own voice and learn to sell their vision and ideas (Brue & Brue, 2016).

Armed with new knowledge, many ALDP’s have aimed to improve participants’ communication skills (Black & Earnest, 2009; Carter & Rudd, 2000; Diem & Nikola, 2005; Howell et al., 1982). Kaufman et al. (2012) found consensus in the idea that an ALDP should
develop leaders who can promote agriculture both inside and outside the industry. One commonly emphasized aspect of promoting agriculture has been political advocacy. The challenges in agriculture have often related to public policy and the solutions have been created through the political advocacy of people who can persuasively communicate about their industry (Kaufman et al., 2010). Understanding the issues that affect agriculture and relying on the network provided by ALDPs, participants become more involved in the political process so that they can help develop public policy (Carter & Rudd, 2000; Strickland, 2011).

This outcome in ALDPs of advocacy, especially in a political sense has been echoed by a study of a formal academic agricultural leadership program. According to Alexander (2015) “agricultural leadership students are vital to shaping the agricultural industry regarding political, policy, and public influence” (p. 71). Whent and Leising (1992) found that graduates of California’s ALDP increased their membership in political organizations. Further, Abington-Cooper (2005) found that participating in the LSU AgCenter’s ALDP had a positive impact on respondents’ involvement on agricultural and non-agricultural issues at the local, state, national, and international levels. In a concrete way, this was exemplified by graduates who have run for and been elected to public office at the federal, state, and local levels (Abington-Cooper, 2005).

**Practical Skills and Problem Solving**

Some authors characterized the programmatic focus on skill development as those outcomes which are practical or transferable. These skills include critical thinking and problem solving, especially as related to business and management of people. An overarching goal of ALDPs have been the personal growth of participants. For instance, Black and Earnest (2009) identified several skills, some mentioned previously such as communication, networking, and self-confidence, and added creative thinking and business skills to the panoply of outcomes.
Many participants in ALDPs manage a group of people. ALDPs include farmers who employ a group of people but often have little or no experience in human resources or management. In her evaluation of the LSU AgCenter’s ALDP, Abington-Cooper (2005) noted that participants gained business and personnel management skills but that they also desired more learning opportunities in these areas. Lamm et al. (2021) evaluated the improvement of conflict management capacity in 80 members of Georgia’s ALDP called LEAD21. Utilizing the Conflict Management Scale and The Work Domain Goal Orientation Instrument, they found a 15.2% increase in conflict management capacity, which quantified earlier findings by Lamm et al. (2020) that leadership training improved conflict management capacity.

As reported by Carter and Rudd (2000) the Florida ALDP utilized the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator tool, which helped participants gain perspective about themselves and others, which when coupled with the skills of communication and networking, improved participants’ people skills. Another reported outcome of the Florida program has been critical thinking and analytical skills (Carter & Rudd, 2000). These practical skills help participants attempt to solve the problems facing agriculture in their state. Participants in the study by Kaufman et al. (2010) explained the importance for creative problem solving as a desirable outcome of ALDPs. Kaufman et al. (2012) identified the emphasis on collaborative decision making and solutions in Virginia’s ALDP. In developing practical skills, leadership programs seek to equip participants to utilize their newfound or improved abilities in the workplace and in their communities (Kaufman, 2010).

**Leadership in Action and Behavioral Outcomes**

“Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2022, p. 6). The many specific outcomes of ALDPs are
oriented toward creating leaders. Graduates who subsequently serve in a leadership role gives credibility and justification to the leadership program. There has been very little longitudinal research of ALDPs. Most programs focus on each class or cohort and building connections between current participants and alumni groups. Published literature examined trends over the long-term has been sparse. It is evident, however, that ALDPs develop the skills needed to be a leader. Abington-Cooper (2005) reported that the perception from participants in the LSU AgCenter ALDP was that they did indeed develop leadership competencies. Lamm et al. (2016) focused on evaluating the extension-based leadership development programs in agriculture and natural resources in the southern United States. This was the most comprehensive effort at quantifying the number of graduates who served in a leadership role. Of the 633 survey respondents, 87% reported that they had served in at least one leadership role.

Serving in a leadership role was less about leadership ability than it is about willingness to participate. Improving communication skills and building relationships created the confidence needed to participate in civic and community projects (Dhanakumar et al., 1996). As reported by Strickland (2011), the New York ALDP includes concepts related to personal reflection to create lifelong learners. The desired outcome was a perspective and behavior change that sought to motivate graduates to seek leadership roles. In this way, ALDPs seek to create behavioral outcomes that impact both the individual participant and their community (Carter & Culbertson, 2012).

Published literature from other kinds of leadership development programs generally supports the leadership behavior outcomes of ALDPs. In an online leadership development course for county extension directors, six months after program completion, participants reported significant behavior change, perhaps better characterized as a mindset change, related to their
perception of their leadership role, providing feedback, and understanding and appreciating differences (Sowcik et al., 2018). Evaluating the Rural Education and Development Association training programs in Alberta, Canada, Sogunro (1997) found that respondents reported behavior changes. Some changes such as conflict management and decision-making were planned and desired changes of the program, but other changes were unintended but beneficial such as confidence in promoting causes and motivating others, all of which were clear evidence of leadership development. Leadership growth, which generally includes the concepts discussed in this section, has been related to pedagogical and programmatic aspects of a postsecondary leadership program such as mentoring, seminar, and experiential learning (Strawn et al., 2017). Leadership behavior change can be exemplified by a commitment to serving as explained by McKim and Velez (2017). In a survey of graduates from a post-secondary leadership development program, this was one of the highest growth areas related to leadership behavior (McKim & Velez, 2017).

**Theoretical Framework**

Among adults today, there is a general sense that learning is a wide-ranging term not confined to formal education in schools. Learning is a life-long process that, upon graduation, occurs mostly in informal or non-formal settings. Adults are keenly aware of the importance of their life experiences and the importance of relationships. The age-old maxims ring true: *if I knew then what I know now and it’s not what you know but who you know*. Agreeing to participate in a program such as an ALDP is a significant undertaking. Learning in a cohort model offers the opportunity of advancing understanding about a topic and, at the same time, building relationships with others. In today’s business parlance, this would be considered *networking*. Even taken separately there is benefit in learning and networking. Combined, each
strengthens the other. Adults learning and building social capital through relationships enhances the entire experience. Adult learning theory and social capital theory provide the context needed to fully appreciate the effectiveness of the LSU AgCenter ALDP as expressed by the participants who provided comments about their experiences.

Social Capital Theory

Bourdieu (1980) and Coleman (1990), two sociologists, separately completed the early work in creating a theory of social capital occurred during the 1980s and 1990s. Each took a different approach to describe the concept of social capital, but both explained the importance of networks and relationships in creating social capital. Following Coleman’s structure, Robert Putnam, a political scientist, contributed to the study of social capital theory today. Hauberer (2011) considered Coleman and Bourdieu as the founding fathers of social capital.

Social capital theory explains that relationships have value, usefulness, and utility. Aristotle said that a friendship of utility is easily dissolved, which might be true, but for the time period in which it existed, the relationship was valuable to the parties involved. For Bourdieu, the value of social capital is linked to economic capital, which is not money but can be converted into money easily. He compares this to cultural capital which is not easily changed into money but still has considerable value. Examples include knowledge, skills, and the degrees or certifications that follow (Bourdieu, 1986). Acquiring cultural capital takes time and effort and it is tied to the person who invested the required time. Social capital is another kind of capital which is acquired through relationships and group membership. The amount of social capital a person has depends on the number of relationships they build as well as the resources available to individuals. Social capital categorizes the capital that obviously exists but is not accounted for in economic or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).
For Coleman, social capital is best explained through rational choice theory. For instance, a person is interested in knowing about other people because it helps them make better decisions for themselves. If a relationship is developed, there exists a potential for an exchange of goods, among other benefits (Hauberer, 2011). Relationships and the exchange of information that occurs between parents, teachers, and students, supports the intellectual and social development of children (Coleman, 1990). An important concept for Coleman was that social capital pertains only to the people who have a relationship or who participate in a group. It can only exist with two or more people and cannot be annexed by an individual and carried off. Social capital is a public, not private good (Coleman, 1990). Coleman (1990) also explained that organizations can be established to provide social capital to members or participants, which creates benefit both to those both inside and outside the organization. Bourdieu, however, viewed social capital as strictly for the members of a group, not for non-members or outsiders.

Putnam (1995) aligned closely with Coleman and provided further explanation of social capital. He explains interactions in terms of physical capital, human capital, and social capital, which comes about because of the interaction among individuals. As a political scientist, he saw social capital as closely related to political participation that required interactions with political institutions and social capital strictly depended on relationships between individuals (Putnam, 1995).

The three main leaders in social capital theory all see social capital as a good. Bourdieu conceived of social capital as a private good, whereas Putman viewed it as a public good and Coleman’s idea was somewhere in the middle but closer to the side of a public good. Across these and other researchers in social capital theory, there has been wide agreement that relationships were important for acquiring other kinds of capital such as economic, cultural, and
human. As we will see, these tenets of social capital theory, although virtually unknown to the participants in the LSU AgCenter ALDP, have been implicit in many of the comments provided by interviewees. Social capital theory will help us understand the perceived value of the program.

**Adult Learning Theory**

Adult education is a broad field of study that includes a vast range of ages, subject areas, end points, and modes of delivery. Within adult learning, there is formal learning which is often but not always tied to earning credit or a credential, and informal learning, which might be something along the lines of lessons derived from daily life. There is also nonformal learning which maintains some structure but is undertaken outside of an organization or institution. Academic studies about adult education tend to focus on formal education programs because these programs tend to track data and measure outcomes whereas data about nonformal programs is difficult to attain (Merriam et al., 2007).

Why do adults seek education and learning beyond high school or college? Merriam et al. (2007) contended that the modern globalized world demands it, but also noted that Stubblefield and Keane (1994) who constructed a survey of adult education beginning in colonial times, that Americans have always had a desire for knowledge that would improve their lives. Globalization, especially regarding the increasing interconnectedness of global economics, required a new way of working and the training required to accomplish that work. “A global economy, the shift to a service and information society, and consequent changes in the configuration of the labor force are determining to a large extent where learning takes place, what is offered, and who participates” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 17).
Technology continues to rapidly change and access to nearly unlimited amounts of information is possible from any smartphone. Within adult education, there is emphasis not only on maintaining the ability to utilize the changing technologies but also the ability to evaluate the credibility and usefulness of the information it provides (Amstutz & Whitson, 1997). The desire to remain current with current trends through continued education in adulthood has often been linked to job-related reasons such as improving their ability to do their current job or to prepare for a new job (Johnstone & Rivera, 1965). Across numerous studies of adult learners, the demographic is homogenous: young, middle-class, white, currently employed, and with more formal education than those who do not participate in formal adult education. Among those who do not participate, lack of time and money are the main reasons given (Merriam et al., 2007).

Within adult learning theory, Knowles’ work on andragogy has been foundational. Across his various writings, he proposed six assumptions about the adult learner. Importantly, he noted the change in self-concept that occurs as a person matures. In similar fashion, this maturation process brings about a change in adult learners who are more focused on solving problems rather than learning about subjects. He also commented on the numerous life experiences of the adult learner which are, in themselves, formative and that the readiness of the adult learner is related to the developmental tasks of their social role (Knowles, 1980). In later writings, Knowles added two more assumptions related to internal motivations and the need to know the reason for learning something (Merriam et al., 2007).

Merriam et al. (2007) observed that, within Knowles’s writings there is almost no consideration of the social or cultural context in which the adult learner exists which creates something of a caricature of a person. His humanistic psychology creates an individual “who is autonomous, free, and growth oriented” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 7). Other critiques of
Knowles’s andragogy have said that it supported the status quo, which has been replete with inequality (Sandlin, 2005).

Another model contributing to the theory of adult education predates Knowles’s andragogy. McClusky’s theory of margin posits that adults continually undergo a transformation based on the amount of energy needed for growth and the amount of energy available. This model added a dimension lacking from andragogy, namely that adults are busy, and their lives are complex. Adult learning is a give and take between the load (e.g., family, work, and aspirations) with the power (e.g., support from family and financial resources). The model does not explain how adults learn so much as it helps us understand when adults have the capacity to engage in adult learning (Merriam et al., 2007).

The three dimensions of learning model created by Illeris (2004) better addresses the learning process. The three dimensions are cognition, emotion, and society. This model accounted for the individual in a way that Knowles’s andragogy did not. Each student derives something different from a specific lesson, lecture, or experience. There could be immediate or delayed impact about the lesson learned and positive or negative impact regarding the lesson, classmates, or the institution. The impact that a particular experience has on a learner is unique due to their current position in society, emotion, and cognition (Merriam et al., 2007).

Jarvis (2006) developed a model that incorporated aspects of the models cited previously, which made Jarvis’s learning process more comprehensive. Learning in general but especially adult learning, is “an interactive phenomenon, not an isolated internal process” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 103). His model included not only the learning process, but also the whole person, including senses and emotions, their social environment, how they learn, and what they have experienced.
There is no single theory of adult learning, but these models help us understand that learning in adulthood is substantially different from learning in childhood because of maturity and varying life experience. Existing and new theories continue to be developed with different approaches seeking to better explain why and how adults learn. Understanding the complexities of adult participants and how they learn is critical for developing agricultural leadership development programs and similar formalized programs of adult education.

Summary

The land-grant system of universities is a fitting home for many of the ALDPs in the U.S. today because they are an example of the importance of Extension. The work done in Michigan more than 70 years ago continues to have impact today in the U.S. and across the world. The ALDP at the LSU AgCenter is influenced by the original Kellogg Farmers Study Program. The program is long-running and well-funded, being supported both logistically and financially by the Louisiana Farm Bureau and various commodity-focused groups. Many goals of the program during its creation remain, which consists of a curriculum of agricultural and leadership related topics delivered via multi-day seminars and travel experiences over a period of two years.

The outcomes of many ALDPs, including the program at the LSU AgCenter have considerable similarities: increasing knowledge about program-determined subject areas and helping participants build relationships with each other and with industry. These outcomes together help participants build social capital. As a result of ALDPs, participants have been more likely to increase their participation within their communities and especially in politics. Developing communication skills necessary to advocate for themselves and for their industry has been a focus of many ALDPs. Graduates frequently become involved in local, state, and national organizations which often have the additional element of working within the political system.
LSU AgCenter ALDP graduates become advocates for agriculture. The outcomes of leadership development programs, which are not focused on agriculture, have also been similar.

Social capital theory and adult learning theory help us understand the profound impacts that ALDPs frequently have on participants. Adult learning theory explains that adults, especially in non-formal settings, learn differently than they did at a younger age in a school setting. Social capital theory explains that networking and relationship building is important for participants. Taken together, these two theories provide a lens through which to view the impacts and outcomes of ALDPs.
Chapter 3. Methodology

This chapter explains how I designed the study as well as collected and analyzed the data using qualitative research methodology. The main data sources were interviews of graduates of the LSU AgCenter ALDP. However, I also collected additional data sources including written documents and persistent observations of the program. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling with assistance from the program director. A table was provided to give basic demographic context to the interview participant group along with the list of questions that guided the semi-structured interview. Data were analyzed by coding interview transcripts and other data sources. Finally, the trustworthiness of the study is described.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this case study was to describe the perspectives of graduates of the LSU AgCenter’s ALDP since 2005 regarding the impact on their leadership abilities. Previously a quantitative research study was conducted evaluating the program through a survey of graduates from the initial class in 1988 to 2004. Data were utilized to describe the participants’ perspectives and the outcomes of the program. Data were collected through purposive and snowball sampling via personal interviews with the subjects involved. At this stage of the research, leadership will be generally defined as a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2022).

Subjects of this study were asked 17 questions during a personal interview that was conducted either via phone or video call and recorded to ensure that all information was collected. Participants were assured that there were no correct or incorrect answers and that names would not be used in publications or shared with program staff. Initial questions gathered background and biographical information about each participant before moving into questions
related to the LSU AgCenter ALDP curriculum and their takeaways or lessons learned as a result of participation. Several questions allowed for modest evaluation of the three guiding principles. Some questions, especially the final question, were related to the questions asked of graduates from the 2005 Study. While the previous study was quantitative, containing a survey instrument of 115 questions, comparisons could be made between the subjects of this and the previous study.

Reflexivity of the Researcher

According to Stake (1995), data gathering “begins before there is a commitment to do the study” (p. 49). As an employee of the agricultural center in Louisiana where the Agricultural Leadership program is housed, I want to acknowledge how my experiences and biases influenced this study. While I had some interactions with the director of the LSU AgCenter ALDP, I was not one of his direct reports, nor was I in a supervisory position over the director or the program; we are merely colleagues within the same organization. During a portion of the time in which the data was collected, I served in an external relations capacity and had professional working relationships with some of the study participants. Other participants were entirely unknown to me before their interview. Regardless of the prior relationship, I made a great effort to separate, as much as possible, my job from the academic task at hand. The ALDP in Louisiana is well-known in part because of its stability over the last 35 years. As such, it has a reputation both internally among the staff of the LSU AgCenter and externally among directors of other state-run agriculture-focused leadership development programs. Prior to my research, I was at least tangentially aware of the reputation of the LSU AgCenter ALDP. I wish to acknowledge that these prior relationships with study participants and impressions about the program created inherent bias which influenced my interpretation of the findings.
Institutional Review Board

Prior to conducting interviews, a proposal was submitted to the LSU AgCenter Institutional Review Board (IRB). The study was approved as protocol IRBAG-23-0029 from March 3, 2023, through March 2, 2026.

Research Design

I designed a qualitative, instrumental case study to describe how 12 graduates of the LSU AgCenter ALDP learned, built relationships, and experienced personal growth during and after their participation in the program. Instrumental case studies can provide a better general understanding of a program (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995). Although the ALDP in Louisiana had previously been studied, an update has not been provided since 2005. The present study was bounded by time and place and sought to update the available research by conducting retrospective research on graduates of the program from 2005 through 2023. Bounds of time and place are the very definition of a case study (Stake, 2005). Although not by design, this study aligns with the tenure of the current director, Dr. Robert J. “Bobby” Soileau. All participants interviewed completed the program under Dr. Soileau’s leadership, so the description of the program and emergent themes are especially relevant. Creswell and Poth (2018) described case study research as a methodology and explained that case studies utilize multiple sources of information. This study utilized interviews, observation, and documents. The case study approach in qualitative research was appropriate for the study of a program and provided a rich description of the case, key themes, and assertions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

Row crop farming, although focusing on different crops, is the occupation of the majority of participants in the research interviews. Most participants are white males. This reflected the
overall demographics of recent classes of the LSU AgCenter ALDP. The majority of the participants have been white males involved in row crop production agriculture. Program participant demographics mirror the Louisiana agricultural sector. Although Louisiana has many small farms and historically underrepresented farmers, these operations are a small percentage of overall production, and these producers often have other primary sources of income (USDA, 2019).

Table 3.1. Demographics of interview participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Graduation</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>XIV</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>XIII</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Government Relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>XV</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Farming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>XVII</td>
<td>2023</td>
<td>Government Relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>XII</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Farming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>XV</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>XI</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Farming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>XV</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Farming (small scale)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>XIV</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Farming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>XIV</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Farming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>XIII</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Farming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>XVI</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Agronomy (corporate)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Instrumentation**

Participants in this study were asked questions during a semi-structured personal interview that was conducted either in-person, via phone, or via video call and recorded to ensure that all information was collected. Participants were assured that there are no correct or incorrect answers and that names were not used in publications or shared with program staff. Initial questions gathered background and biographical information about each participant before moving into questions related to the program curriculum and their takeaways or lessons learned as a result of participation. Several questions in this study echoed the questions asked in Abington-Cooper’s (2005) study to allow for modest comparisons between the responses of two
different groups of program participants, even though the previous study was quantitative, containing a survey instrument of 115 questions.

1. What is your background (early life, interests, education)?

2. How did you decide to apply for the Ag Leadership Program?

3. Prior to your participation in the program, did you know any graduates of the Ag Leadership Program and what is your connection with them?

4. What topic covered in the curriculum was the most interesting to you?

5. To what extent did the Ag Leadership Program provide study of various leadership traits theories?

6. How would you describe your personal style of leadership?

7. How has your thinking about the best way to be a leader been challenged or changed as a result of this program?

8. What actions did you take in your professional life after completing this program that you might not have had if you had not participated in the Ag Leadership Program?

9. Along the same lines, what actions in your personal life do you attribute to the Ag Leadership Program?

10. Has your participation in the Ag Leadership Program helped you understand agriculture at a global level and prepared you for new opportunities? If yes, how so?

11. What leadership skills did you gain as a result of the program?

12. Are you better able to communicate about your own role within the agricultural industry as a result of your program?

13. How has your participation in agricultural, social, or civic organizations and issues within your community changed after participating in the Ag Leadership Program?
14. Would you encourage or have you encouraged others to apply for the Ag Leadership Program and why?

15. How important is the Ag Leadership Program to the future of agriculture in Louisiana?

16. Is there anything you want to share that I did not ask about?

17. Is there anyone else who you think should participate in this study?

**Researcher as the Instrument and Interview Protocol**

The researcher is both the data collection and analysis tool of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As such, I used semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis to collect the data. I created the interview protocol in March 2023 during coursework for *Qualitative Research in Agricultural and Extension Education*. The interview questions were reviewed by the researcher’s major professor who was a member of the faculty of the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education and Evaluation at LSU. The LSU AgCenter IRB approved the interview questions. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that qualitative research is an emergent process which the process of data collection can change and evolve during the study. The order and structure of interview questions varied by participant with the aim of encouraging rich, reflective, and thorough responses. Additionally, as a result of feedback from interviewees, the researcher observed a seminar of the LSU AgCenter ALDP, which provided significant context and a snapshot of current participants who at the point of observation are only a quarter of the way through the program.

**Participant Selection**

The study used purposive sampling by initially working with Dr. Soileau. To achieve the requirements of a short timeline, he identified several graduates who likely would be willing to
be interviewed. He selected three initial interview participants, secured their willingness to participate, and sent introductory emails so that I could schedule interviews in short order. Additionally, I requested interviews from two other graduates of the program with whom I have a prior relationship due to my work at the LSU AgCenter. The remaining seven interview participants were selected from a list of potential candidates provided by Dr. Soileau or suggested by program alumni during their interview. The participants \((n = 12)\) were purposively chosen to represent different aspects of the agricultural industry: finance, production, and advocacy. Additionally, the participants were located in different areas of the state.

Every participant in the LSU AgCenter ALDP must have had a current connection to Louisiana’s agricultural industry. Most but not all of the interviewees come from an ag background, meaning they grew up involved in programs like 4-H, FFA, or lived on a farm. Others developed an interest in agriculture later in life. Because there are many jobs within agriculture, the level of education varied greatly. Among the 12 participants interviewed for this study, formal education ranged from high school diploma to master’s degree in agriculture. It is a formidable task to create a program that resonates with such a broad audience. One participant had little recollection of anything related to leadership theory while another lamented his experience of there being only one session devoted to what he considered true leadership development. Each graduate interviewed for this study was able to recount several aspects of the curriculum and explain its impact on them personally or professionally. Both the amount and complexity of the connections made from the program’s curriculum to their personal and professional lives varied significantly, which further highlighted the diversity of their educational backgrounds and current profession.
**Data Collection**

The main sources of data were verbatim interview transcripts from the participants. Twelve participants were interviewed via Microsoft Teams with audio and almost all with video as long as the internet connection was steady. All interviews were semi-structured and recorded. Interview questions were developed related to the stated purpose and goals of the program and inspired by some questions proposed in the previous study so that a modest comparison with the 1998-2004 study could be included. Interviews lasted between 35 and 75 minutes, depending on the loquaciousness of the participant. Brinkman and Kvale (2015) described interviews as an occasion for constructing knowledge by learning the participants’ lived experience and point of view. Therefore, except for initial and follow-up questions, I was relatively quiet, allowing each participant time to reflect on their participation in the program and an opportunity to tell the story of their experiences during and as a result of the program. Non-interview data sources considered include the ten-page application for Class XVIII, observation of the current class during a three-day seminar, and documents about the program available online.

**Data Analysis**

After data collection, I transcribed all interviews verbatim. Using Microsoft Word, each transcript was coded three times: (1) descriptive, (2) emotion, and (3) in vivo. Descriptive coding is especially useful for beginning qualitative researchers and provides a list of topics to assist with categorizing (Saldaña, 2021). Emotion coding “provides insight into the participants’ perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 364). In vivo coding is another first cycle coding technique useful for beginning qualitative researchers because it uses the participant’s own words and preserves their account of the experience (Saldaña, 2021). Concurrent with and upon completion of the first cycle coding for each transcript, I wrote memos.
which capture emerging insights and summarize my impressions of the participant (Miles et al., 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021). Each first cycle coding offered a unique perspective on the interview. Descriptive coding provides a summative accounting of the main topics discussed in a particular exchange (Saldaña, 2021). Emotion coding might be an unusual coding method for this case study, but I observed moments of intense emotion from each participant. In vivo coding provided a way to capture the uniqueness of each participant in their own words (Saldaña, 2021). Taken together, these three first cycle codes offer a comprehensive analysis of the interview transcript. All first cycle codes, 771 in total, were compiled into a code book and arranged alphabetically to facilitate second cycle axial coding methodology, which “extends the analytic work from initial coding” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 361). Initial axial codes from my analysis included: (a) broadened perspective, (b) networking, (c) maturing.

**Trustworthiness**

It is important to establish confirmability, dependability, credibility, and transferability of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability, which relates to the factors that influence the outcomes of the study, is achieved by linking data to conclusions and admitting biases. Throughout the entirety of the study, I maintained the highest ethical standards possible. During interviews and observation, subjects were made aware of the purpose of the research study and assured that anonymity would be maintained in both data collection and any resultant publications. Additionally, their perspectives about the program were recorded verbatim and represented as faithfully as possible to accurately represent the reality of participation in the LSU AgCenter ALDP. Dependability means conducting research consistently over the time period of the study. Establishing dependability by describing my role within the study and collecting data that is suggested by the research questions. Credibility means that findings are coherent with
respect to the data examined and body of existing literature. I provided context-rich descriptions of interview responses and triangulated the data across interviews and other data sources which supported converging conclusions. Finally, transferability considers whether this study’s findings are applicable to other contexts. Describing the study’s participants ensures that accurate comparisons can be made from the findings to other contexts.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to describe the perspectives of graduates of the LSU AgCenter’s ALDP and their self-reported outcomes. This study sought to update the body of literature about the Louisiana ALDP, which has been sparingly studied. A previous research study ended with Class VIII and the present study continues with Class IX through the most recently completed Class XVI. Interview participants, who are all graduates of the program, responded to 17 semi-structured interviews during a recorded phone or video call. Some questions required the participants to reflect on the impact that various aspects of the program, or the program overall, had on them both during and after the program. Other questions required less detail and were meant to gather contextual information regarding background and demographics.

The researcher is employed by the LSU AgCenter, which is the same organization that runs the LSU AgCenter ALDP. However, the researcher had little interaction with program leadership or program participants prior to the study. The qualitative, instrumental case study was approved by the LSU AgCenter IRB. Sample sizes in qualitative research are often criticized for their size but the researcher experienced data saturation by the final interview. The demographic data of the study participants was a reflection of the Louisiana agricultural industry, and efforts were made to include participants from the diverse regions of the state. Participant
interview verbatim transcripts were coded utilizing descriptive, emotion, and in vivo coding methods.
Chapter 4. Findings

Overview of Findings

This chapter outlines the findings of the study which are organized into three main themes, each containing several subthemes. I used qualitative coding methods to analyze the interview transcripts of the 12 participants, the application form, plaques dedicated to the first class, the founding director, and the endowed chair, as well as my observation notes. Beginning analysis with three first cycle codes for every interview, especially the use of in vivo coding, created 771 codes.

It was a struggle to reduce the codes while theoretically representing the data accurately. Despite this, using axial coding, I deduced three very broad second cycle codes of (a) broadened perspective, (b) networking, and (c) maturing. Each provides context to the self-reported outcomes from LSU AgCenter ALDP participants and the foundation of the three overarching themes: (1) broadened perspective and understanding, (2) networking and relationship building, and (3) mindset shift toward leadership. Each main theme contains several subthemes which give further insight into the program and participants’ perspectives. The subthemes help us connect the main themes to adult learning theory and social capital theory, lenses through which we will come to understand the program’s outcomes and answer the study’s research questions.

Table 4.1. Themes and subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broadened Perspective and Understanding</th>
<th>Networking and Relationship Building</th>
<th>Mindset Shift Toward Leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other Areas of Agriculture</td>
<td>Classmates, Alumni, and Industry</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics and Economics</td>
<td>Social Capital</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapting to Change</td>
<td>Recruiting</td>
<td>Participation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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# Theme #1: Broadened Perspective and Understanding

The first theme, *broadened perspective and understanding* was best described through the lens of adult learning theory. Johnstone and Rivera (1965) linked continued education in adulthood to the pragmatic aspects related to one’s job. Education generally makes someone better at their current job or makes them better equipped to find a new job. Knowles (1980) noted the process of maturing that often accompanies learning in adulthood. Both the process of learning and the growing number of life experiences contribute to adults’ ability to problem solve and take on leadership roles.

The subtheme of *other areas of agriculture* was related to participants’ growing knowledge about other areas within the broad industry of agriculture that are beyond their own role and participation. During my observation of the current LSU AgCenter ALDP class, I made note of many participants taking photos of PowerPoint slides shown by various presenters. Initially I noticed this during a presentation about the Farm Bill. At a basic level, members of the class were taking notes about new information that they might want to reference later. Their body language indicated interest and active listening. They participated by paying attention and asking questions about the information being presented. It was clear that they were taking seriously the opportunity to learn new information. Their active participation was not only evident in the classroom-style lectures, but also during the tours and in discussions with fellow classmates. All appeared committed to gaining a better understanding of the perspectives of presenters and classmates. Even when presentations and discussions were closely related to their
individual area of expertise, they were eager to participate and support their classmates in learning about a particular aspect of the agricultural industry.

The LSU AgCenter ALDP application emphasized the opportunity to learn from other points of view and the importance of an excellent learning environment. I witnessed the current class demonstrate a commitment to these points. Additionally, program alumni reported similar outcomes related to other areas of agriculture during their interviews. One alumnus of the program said: “it was more than just learning in the classroom; it was actually going into the field” (Participant 10). Some participants remarked that they now understood agriculture beyond their own farm. “The exposure to overall general agriculture, everything from animal agriculture to row crop agriculture, to agricultural policy” (Participant 2). This was most pointedly emphasized during the program’s international trip. “It was eye opening to be able to see the difference in agriculture in other countries” (Participant 11). One alumnus recalled that learning from classmates being just as valuable as the presentations, tours, and travel experiences. “We had a lady who was a queen bee breeder! I had an extremely long conversation with her about it. That was fantastic about the program as well” (Participant 3). There were many instances where alumni talked about developing a better understanding of aspects of agriculture different from their own area of expertise.

Another subtheme was politics and economics and how changes related to these topics impacted their livelihood. Often, I observed that questions or comments after a seminar presentation were related to the current political or economic situation. Several participants appeared to be very aware of current events in state and national politics and how they would impact their area of the agricultural industry. One of the speakers during a seminar that I observed was Louisiana State Senator Stewart Cathey, who was the chairman of the committee
on Agriculture, Forestry, Aquaculture, and Rural Development. There was a very active discussion between class participants and Senator Cathey related to impacts on agriculture of recently passed legislation and potential impacts during the 2024 legislative session.

LSU AgCenter ALDP alumni have a keen interest in local, state, national, and even international politics because they have gained an understanding that politics and macroeconomics often have an impact on their jobs within the agricultural industry. “Realizing how little I know on a global scale and the importance of global economics. Like going to South Africa, seeing the impact of global trade on that country and the impact if something happens there” (Participant 9). The same alumnus also reflected on tour experiences closer to home. “The port of New Orleans and just seeing the ag impact on the economy in Louisiana” (Participant 9). One alumnus connected their experiences in the program to their participation in politics. “Everything I just said about learning what goes on in other countries and states, it’s got me more involved in politics” (Participant 11). Many alumni who participated in this study talked about broadening their perspective and understanding of politics and economics because of their experiences in the program. There was a shift from a local focus to an appreciation of the state, national, and international situation and the challenges and opportunities that this presents to them as a single participant in the agricultural industry.

This shift in focus and growing understanding of areas of agriculture beyond their own is related to the next subtheme of adapting to change. In part related to globalization and technology, alumni interviewed in this study were keenly aware of their need to be able to adapt to change. During my observation, the class visited a sweet potato field that was close to harvest. The farmer recounted his last decade farming sweet potatoes and explained how many years the crop was bad and only a few were very successful. This year was an especially abundant crop,
but he had the added challenge of canceled contracts because the company overbought relative to sweet potato demand. He added to this the challenge of a delay in the arrival of his immigrant laborers, potentially ruining the timely harvest of his crop. Farmers in the class were likely familiar with similar situations on their own farms, but this provided another experience for everyone about the need to be able to adapt to short-term change that is a result of a political and economic situation outside of their control.

The large bronze plaque that recognizes the first class to complete the LSU AgCenter ALDP contains the following statement: “The program offers emerging leaders an opportunity to gain invaluable insight into the complexity of converging national and international policies that affect their lives” (Plaque with background information about LSU AgCenter ALDP). One alumnus commented about the tendency to view a situation with blinders which would make it difficult to adapt to change in a dynamic and globalized industry like agriculture. “Again, it’s very easy to bury our heads in the sand on the farm and not worry about things outside of the state, our farm, or even the U.S.” (Participant 9). There was also recognition that agriculture is dynamic and changing not only due to international politics and economics but also due to advancements in technology. “I’ll never forget we had some IT person come in…and we’re like what is the cloud? What are you talking about?” (Participant 5). This alumnus directly connected his experience during one seminar to their farm being on the cutting edge of adopting cloud services for data storage. Another alumnus remarked that when their class traveled to South Africa, they expected to see old tractors and instead they found the latest high tech John Deere tractors with GPS guidance (Participant 1). It was clear that the alumni of the LSU AgCenter ALDP were better prepared to adapt to a changing agricultural industry precisely because they
have observed firsthand the impacts of global politics, economics, and the increased use of advanced technology in the agricultural industry.

The subtheme of *communication skills* was straightforward: participants reported significant improvements in their communication skills and commented on the improvement of certain classmates. Along with their improved oral communication abilities, they also learn the importance of being effective communicators. During my observation, I noted that class members were assigned to introduce presenters to the class. It appeared that some had not done anything like this since high school. It was interesting that even adults, especially those who do not often do it, still get nervous when they must speak in front of a group. My sense was that this desire to be a better communicator was partially responsible for their interest in participating in the program. The participants were not new to the agricultural industry. All have some interaction with agricultural organizations or commodity meetings. In those interactions, they witness leaders who speak with conviction about agriculture, and I think they desire to provide similar leadership to the industry.

Effective communication has been advanced as one of the emphases of the program (LSU AgCenter, 2023a, para. 2). Public speaking is implied in the program’s Statement of Responsibilities found in the application: “I will accept various seminar roles assigned by faculty. This could include serving as a seminar moderator” (Application Form). I used the descriptive code *communication skills* 13 times for eight of the 12 participants. The alumni shared the following reflections:

- “That they can communicate better with customers” (Participant 1)
- “That they are more comfortable speaking in front of people” (Participant 10)
- “That they learned how to focus their message” (Participant 11)
“That they got better at public speaking because of the three required speeches”

(Participant 2)

The foundation for the importance of communication skills was created early during the program. Almost every graduate of the program mentioned the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, although one person initially referred to it as Briggs Stratton, the engine manufacturer. Participants reported that this helped them better understand themselves and made them consider how they communicate with others. As it was the first time for most to complete any kind of personality test, it proved to be an eye-opening experience. Perhaps the most compelling case for this subtheme was articulated by one alumnus talking about why they applied to the program. “I actually went on the LSU AgCenter ALDP’s website and read into it. It was that one sentence that said it will teach you to become effective communicators and that I always found was my weak suit” (Participant 3). They went on to say that anything related to communication was the most interesting part of the program for them. Among the subthemes under broadened perspective and understanding, communication skills were the most concrete. Effective communication skills are important for life, but especially in agriculture, which is an area that few people understand today.

The final subtheme of maturing and humility emerged as participants articulated how they had matured and developed a sense of humility during their time in the program. This notion emerged as the participants expressed their growing understanding of agricultural issues and interactions with leaders across the state, country, and world. During my observations of the LSU AgCenter ALDP class, I did not have any notes related to this, even though it is clearly represented in interviews. Describing their change from the start of the program to the end, one alumnus recollected: “I was a young kid. I didn’t know anything. Honestly, I was a cocky young
farmer that was trying to be successful. I was 23 or 25 years old; you know. I think it humbled me” (Participant 5). Another alumnus recalled their starting point in the program. “When I went through the program, I was very young and very green” (Participant 7). One alumnus described how learning communication skills helped them in personal and professional situations because they were better able to work through contentious issues, a thought that they concluded with the simple sentence “I matured” (Participant 2). The participants have varying amounts of formal education and real-world experience. This subtheme of maturing and humility was expressed by several alumni who I interviewed and exclusively by those who participated in the program earlier in their career.

Theme #2: Networking and Relationship Building

The theme of networking and relationship building would be obvious to anyone who speaks with program alumni or spends a few hours observing the current class. This theme and the following five subthemes were best understood through the lens of social capital theory, which explains that there is utility in relationships. Among past and present social capital theory researchers, there is agreement that relationships are important for if not a required prerequisite of, acquiring other types of capital. Bourdieu (1986) said that a person acquired social capital through relationships and group membership and was related to the number of relationships. Coleman (1990) added that these relationships included an exchange of information which helps people to make better decisions.

The first subtheme was classmates, alumni, and industry. The seminar I observed was the class’s fourth time meeting together and it was amazing to see the friendships they had formed in a few short months. Although they were all strangers at the start, most had formed strong relationships with at least a few classmates. During breaks in the schedule and meals, they work
hard to get to know each other better. Jovial conversations even continued into the restroom. The seminars and tours also offer the opportunity to meet program alumni from that area of the state and the current class was eager to talk with everyone who attended various parts of the three-day seminar. Finally, the presenters, who were experts in certain aspects of the agricultural industry, also took time for conversations with the participants before and after their presentations. Contact information was often exchanged, and some participants intended to follow up with alumni and presenters at a later time. The LSU AgCenter ALDP provided a wonderful opportunity for participants to meet people whom they might not otherwise.

LSU AgCenter ALDP alumni really valued the networking opportunities provided by the program. “The networking opportunities that – you’re going to meet people from across the state!” (Participant 10). “One of the benefits of the program is the networking that’s available” (Participant 12). Some even view the networking opportunity as a main reason for applying to the program. “Accelerate[d] me networking across the state” (Participant 4). To emphasize the kind of relationship building that occurs, Participant 6 said: “it’s not just your class members, it’s almost a fraternity, that is this organization, that is the alumni.”

The second subtheme was social capital which is one that was hard to observe during the seminar. It is a subtheme that was implicit in many interviews but, almost predictably, nobody actually said the words social capital. As explained earlier, social capital precedes other kinds of capital, for example economic capital. Evidence of this is given by one alumnus: “There’s some successes in my career that I’ve had so far since leaving the program that is attributed to my connections from the program” (Participant 1). Another comment highlighted the benefits as participants acquire social capital. “Your network grows and, in this business, really any business, it's not what you know, it’s who you know” (Participant 5). The same alumnus also
talked about the number of connections with people from diverse backgrounds related to agriculture. “You’ve got farmers, you’ve got attorneys, you’ve got policymakers, you’ve got business owners, you’ve got bankers. I mean, it’s just so many, so many people” (Participant 5).

The next subtheme of recruiting shows how relationships were important for applying to the program. All the participants knew someone who had completed the program before they applied. There were, however, different levels of encouragement. Everyone decided to apply because they were exposed to the LSU AgCenter ALDP through a formal or informal network related to Louisiana agriculture. None of the participants stumbled across the program on their own but perhaps others have found the program via something like a Google search. This was another subtheme that was not observable during the seminar I attended. The following table shows each alumnus’ self-described connection to ADLP and a relevant quote.

Table 4.2. Connection to LSU AgCenter ALDP before application

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Connection (Relationship)</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Several alumni</td>
<td>“Through several different connections with people I had, I'd been hearing about the program.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Large group of alumni</td>
<td>“I'd heard from previous graduates of the Ag Leadership Program going all the way back to the early part of my career.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A couple of alumni in the Parish</td>
<td>“They all said it was a great program and they encouraged me to do it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Business colleagues</td>
<td>“I've already heard of the program even when I was in [another state].”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>LSU AgCenter ALDP director</td>
<td>“I didn't even really know what Ag Leadership was until I talked to [ALDP director].”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Business colleagues</td>
<td>“[Alumnus] had a really, really great experience.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Neighbor</td>
<td>“My dad actually went through [another state’s] program when I was a kid.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Some alumni</td>
<td>“With my Farm Bureau exposure, I knew a few graduates from the program.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>A few alumni</td>
<td>“I went to a bunch of [commodity] meetings and there were a number of graduates there.”</td>
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</tbody>
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(table cont’d)
All interviewed alumni of the program had either a relationship with LSU AgCenter ALDP alumni, the director, or both. Relationships were also facilitated by membership in commodity organizations or the Louisiana Farm Bureau. This was not terribly surprising, since the Louisiana agricultural industry is a *small world*.

The final subtheme was *friendships* of the need to place a different emphasis on the networking and relationship-building aspect of the program. At the conclusion of my observation, I wrote the following memo reflecting on my fieldwork:

Many alumni interviewees talk about the networking. Most of them call it that: networking. Having witnessed it, that term is perhaps too transactional and utilitarian. They are building friendships. Friends with common goals of making Louisiana a better place through agriculture. They might agree on ag policy or might not. They might one day work on a collaborative business venture or they might not. But the relationships developed through the program would be hard to describe without the word friendship. Not everyone is friends with everyone, but they are definitely finding new friends in this group, among people whom they likely would never cross paths.

Some alumni talked about the friendships they made during their time in the program. “Had I not participated, there’s a lot of friendships and connections that I have now that obviously I wouldn’t have” (Participant 1). “They really become some of your best friends. Some of the best memories I have are the nights that we went to dinner and spoke” (Participant 3). Regardless of the social capital that is created and the valuable benefits or business deals that might occur, it is
important to acknowledge that some people form life-long friendships as a result of participating in the LSU AgCenter ALDP.

**Theme #3: Mindset Shift Toward Leadership**

The final theme of *mindset shift toward leadership* combined aspects of the two previous main themes, *broadened perspective and understanding* and *networking and relationship building*, as well as both adult learning theory and social capital theory. Stubblefield and Keane (1994), in their historic survey of adult education, put forward the idea that Americans have an almost innate desire to acquire knowledge that will improve their lives. Blending this idea with the importance of relationships explained by social capital theorists like Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam, and we begin to see why many people are attracted to the LSU AgCenter ALDP and report very positive feedback about their experience. The ultimate result is this third theme of *mindset shift toward leadership*, observed during the seminar and documented in multiple interviews.

The first subtheme was *confidence*, which many alumni described during their interviews. It was difficult to observe an increase of confidence during the seminar I attended because I had only one observation in time, not a baseline. I suspect that from the first class meeting to the last, the program director could point out a few participants whose confidence greatly increased during the two-year program. During a conversation with a current LSU AgCenter ALDP participant, they shared with me that, after just two seminars, they found the confidence to not just attend a grower meeting but to, for the first time, actively participate in that meeting. Newfound confidence was mentioned frequently by program alumni. One participant said that without the experience, “I wouldn’t have ever felt confident enough or even
capable enough to go to DC with [commodity group]” (Participant 5). Another alumna described something similar:

A lot of times I’m the only female in the room and going through Ag Leadership gave me the confidence to stand up and be able to confidently talk about the things that either I was getting skipped over to talk about or that I felt like I didn’t have the experience (Participant 11).

Relationships created during the program and through the alumni network also increased the confidence of participants. “I feel more confident knowing there’s a support structure and that if I get out above my waiters, I can always reach out to someone else” (Participant 6). Often the increase in confidence was related to their improved communication skills. “This [LSU AgCenter ALDP] gave a solid foundation to build that confidence to be able to discuss the issue and be persuasive about issues that are important” (Participant 9).

A related subtheme was advocacy. Several of the alumni interviewed talked about their increased confidence spurring them to advocate for the agricultural industry. Although not necessarily partisan, this advocacy was mostly related to policy and politics. During my observation, the president and CEO of a national commodity organization presented on the Farm Bill. The group appeared to be aware of national politics related to agriculture. Later the same day, a professor from a university in another state made a virtual presentation about the Endangered Species Act. One question was asked about how people can act on the issue and the professor gave a response centered on speaking up and advocating for the agricultural industry. One alumnus, reflecting on what was most interesting to them during the program, initially said the networking but “fast forward and I think it has more to do with advocacy, especially on the policy-making side” (Participant 7). Advocacy was important to one alumnus: “I take every opportunity to be an advocate for the industry” (Participant 6). For another the idea of advocacy
was more aggressive: “it should instill in you the incentive and the fire to go out and fight for the industry that we all love so dearly” (Participant 2).

The third subtheme was *participation*, which increases especially with respect to relevant professional organizations and their communities. There was a significant connection between the LSU AgCenter ALDP and the Louisiana Farm Bureau, especially the Young Farmers and Ranchers Committee of Farm Bureau. Many program applicants were either first involved in Young Farmers and Ranchers or became involved after completing the program. More broadly, many tend to be involved in their parish Farm Bureau and become more engaged after. One alumnus who was involved in Farm Bureau and a trade organization said, “I would probably not be as – I know I would not be as active” (Participant 9). Some of the other organizations mentioned by alumni were a local Rotary Club, a groundwater conservation commission, Louisiana Women in Ag, Louisiana Bankers Association, American Farm Bureau, and a local chamber of commerce.

The final subtheme for this theme was *responsibility*. It was related to the prior three subthemes. LSU AgCenter ALDP alumni have increased their confidence, become advocates for agriculture, gotten more involved in organizations, and now they have a sense of responsibility to advance the agricultural industry, especially in Louisiana. Perhaps for the first time, many begin to see themselves as a leader. Because many participants in the program were younger, there was a tendency to see others, perhaps older people, as the leaders in Louisiana agriculture.

During my observation, which took place during the first third of the two-year program, I could already see some, not all, begin to take more seriously the responsibility for leadership. It was most evident in the current class among those who expressed some amount of gratitude for the opportunity to be a part of the program. Among the alumni interviewed, I think the program
helped them to understand that leaders exist at all levels. They take on leadership roles in both local and state-level organizations. Referring to classmates, one alumnus said, “It’s amazing how you see the transition from people, going from Ag Leadership class and stepping up and bring in these leadership roles throughout the whole industry” (Participant 1).

They added that the program was extremely important to the future of Louisiana agriculture, and this was similar to a comment from another alumnus: “I don’t want to overstate it but I think this is just a vital program and incredibly important program for agriculture in the state of Louisiana, and really not just the state, but the nation” (Participant 9). In these comments, we see the gratitude for the program experience and the ownership or responsibility that they are assuming to lead the industry and ensure others can continue to participate in the program. One alumnus summarized it this way: “I feel a personal charge and a personal debt that I owe to the LSU Ag Leadership Program. To past class members, current class members, and certainly future class members” (Participant 2).

Summary

The three main themes of broadened perspective and understanding, networking and relationship building, and mindset shift toward leadership were based on qualitative analysis of interviews, documents, and observation notes. The participants reported gaining a deeper knowledge of other areas of agriculture, politics and economics, adapting to change, communication skills, as well as undergoing the process of maturing. Participants valued the opportunity to meet and connect with classmates, alumni, and industry experts. This created social capital and, in some cases, strong friendships that benefit their personal and professional lives. Interviewees reported an increase in their own confidence, willingness to advocate for the agricultural industry, and a newfound sense of responsibility to be leaders in agriculture. These
positive outcomes of the program are the result of their participation in seminars, tours, and interactions with presenters and classmates.
Chapter 5. Conclusions and Implications

Summary of Previous Chapters

ALDPs are experiential learning programs for agriculturalists and rural leaders that originated from a successful initiative at Michigan State University in 1965. This study addressed a gap in knowledge regarding the impact of the LSU AgCenter’s ALDP, which has been operating continuously since 1988 with little published research. Three research questions aimed to explain the extent to which the program develops leaders who are prepared, confident, and involved in the agricultural system. As such, the purpose of this case study was to describe the perspectives of graduates of the LSU AgCenter’s ALDP since 2005 regarding their self-reported outcomes after completing the two-year program.

ALDPs have been established in many states, often connected to the land-grant universities and their extension mission. ALDPs have a common goal of creating leaders who can promote and advocate for the agricultural industry in a changing and globalized world. The LSU AgCenter ALDP was initiated in 1988 to develop young leaders in Louisiana agriculture. The program has four main goals: (1) prepare participants for global influences and opportunities, (2) enhance their communication and leadership skills, (3) increase their understanding and involvement in social, economic and political systems, and (4) foster their commitment to seek solutions to current and future problems. The program lasts two years and consists of seminars, tours, and travel experiences that cover various topics related to agriculture and leadership. The program has been historically funded by the LSU AgCenter, the Chalkley Family Endowed Chair, and other private donations. It has graduated 466 participants since 1988, many of whom have served or are serving in leadership positions in local and state government, agricultural companies, commodity organizations, and the Louisiana Farm Bureau.
ALDPs have been shown to have positive outcomes for participants, such as increasing their knowledge, building their networks, improving their communication and advocacy skills, developing their practical and problem-solving skills, and enhancing their leadership skills. ALDPs also benefit the agricultural industry and the communities where participants live and work. However, measuring and documenting the impact of ALDPs has been challenging due to the lack of a common evaluation tool and longitudinal data. Some researchers (Black & Earnest, 2009) have proposed the Leadership Program Outcomes Measure (LPOM) as a comprehensive instrument to evaluate the impact of ALDPs on participants and their organizations and communities.

The study of ALDPs in this investigation was informed by two theoretical frameworks: adult learning theory and social capital theory. Adult learning theory explains how adults learn differently from children based on their maturity, life experiences, motivations, and social roles. Adult learning theory also provides various models and approaches to design and deliver effective adult education programs. Social capital theory explains how relationships have value, usefulness, and utility for individuals and groups. Social capital theory also helps to understand how ALDPs create and enhance social networks and resources that can benefit participants and their communities.

I studied the LSU AgCenter’s ALDP, a program that, at its foundation, is designed to help people involved in Louisiana’s agricultural industry to become better leaders. I interviewed graduates of the program, observed the current class in a seminar, and studied historical documents related to the LSU AgCenter ALDP. I utilized qualitative case study research methodology to make sense of the data. The program had three main outcomes on the participants which were the themes that emerged from my qualitative analysis of the data. First,
participation broadened their perspective and understanding of different aspects of agriculture. Second, it helped them network and build relationships with their classmates, alumni, and others involved in the agricultural industry. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it shifted their mindset toward leadership; for the first time, many begin to see themselves as a leader in Louisiana agriculture.

**Conclusions**

Based on the body of published literature and my findings, through the lenses of adult learning theory and social capital theory, I offer three conclusions related to the three research questions.

**Conclusion #1**

The first research question was: to what extent does the LSU AgCenter ALDP develop leaders who are prepared to navigate a globally integrated agricultural system? Based on my findings, I conclude that graduates of the LSU AgCenter ALDP better understood the global agricultural industry because of the experiences they had during the program.

A main *experience* of the program was the relationships participants developed with classmates. As such, the benefits of a diverse cohort cannot be understated. There are practical purposes for finding new leaders in the traditional sectors of Louisiana agriculture: row crops, forestry, and livestock. However, creating advocates in and connections with non-traditional areas of agriculture is also important. Participants reported that conversations with vegetable and flower farmers, beekeepers, and urban agricultural producers, were some of the most impactful interactions during their time in the program. This conclusion was derived from the first and second emergent themes of *broadened perspective and understanding* and *networking and relationship building*. Social capital theory and adult learning theory provided additional context
to this conclusion. Diem and Nikola (2005) explained that learning during the program and especially during an international experience elicits new perspectives, which is important for a globalized industry such as agriculture. Merriam et al. (2007) reported that adults seek continuing education beyond high school and college in part because it is almost required in our modern globalized world. Two study participants made comments related to such. Referring to their understanding of agriculture before joining the program: “now did I realize how nuanced and global it can be? No, I didn’t.” (Participant 1). Participant 2 shared a similar reflection about the content they enjoyed most during the program: “You know, the overall global impact and importance of the agricultural industry to the everyday citizen of the world.”

Conclusion #2

The second research question was: to what extent does the LSU AgCenter ALDP develop leadership skills and awareness in participants, so they become confident, effective communicators? Based on my findings, I conclude that graduates of the LSU AgCenter ALDP improved their communication skills and developed a sense of responsibility to lead and advocate for Louisiana agriculture.

Graduates of the LSU AgCenter ALDP acquired leadership skills by learning new information, being around other leaders, and taking on leadership roles. The program did not focus on formal education in the area of leadership theory, and it is possible that some students could benefit from increased emphasis on formal education in leadership. This conclusion was supported by the first and third emergent themes: broadened perspective and understanding and mindset shift toward leadership. The conclusion was also interpreted using social capital theory and adult learning theory and supported in the literature. Miller (1976) in summarizing the main goals of the Kellogg Farmer Study Program, listed, among others, communication skills. This has
been one of the main topics included in the LSU AgCenter ALDP from the start. Abington-Cooper (2005) reported positive impacts on participants’ communication ability. Further, Kaufman et al. (2010) explained the importance of communicating persuasively about one’s industry for the purpose of political advocacy. Numerous interview participants talked about the improvement in their own and their classmates’ communication abilities. One participant even cited improved communication skills as the main reason they applied for the program. Participant 9 said this about their improved communication skills: “It’s the ability to stand in front of a crowd and articulate your thoughts and opinions very comfortably, and to be able to be a bit more persuasive about issues that are impacting you.”

**Conclusion #3**

The third research question was: To what extent does the LSU AgCenter ALDP develop participant understanding and involvement in the social, economic, and political systems to improve their enterprises and communities? Based on my findings, I conclude that graduates of the LSU AgCenter ALDP improved their own careers through the lessons learned and relationships formed during and after the program. Such was accomplished through their personal business success and increased participation in leadership positions; consequently, they are also improving their local communities.

Several participants mentioned areas they likely would not have completed had they not engaged in the LSU AgCenter ALDP. These accomplishments attributed to the program by the graduates were significant: finishing college, starting their own business, changing jobs, and traveling more with their family. Related to this, interview participants expressed tremendous gratitude for the opportunity to participate in the program. Many had a desire to *pay it forward* by recruiting others to apply for the program and by using their newfound skills to become more
involved in their communities. This conclusion was consistent with the first and third themes: 
*broadened perspective and understanding* and *mindset shift toward leadership* and supported by 
social capital theory and adult learning theory, as well as published literature. Many authors 
discussed the relationships built through ALDP participation. Black and Earnest (2009) said that 
social relationships form as a result of the tours and discussions that take place during the 
program. Kaufman et al. (2010, 2012) mentioned networking as contributing to individual career 
successes and growth for the agricultural industry overall. Similarly, Dhanakumar et al. (1996) 
explained that improved communication skills and new relationships created the confidence 
needed for an individual to become more involved in their local community. Similarly, Carter 
and Culbertson (2012) commented on the desired behavioral outcomes of ALDPs that, through 
increased participation, impacts local communities. Finally, Lamm et al. (2016) quantified 
similar sentiments in a survey that showed 87% of ALDP graduates served in the southern 
portion of the U.S. participated in at least one leadership role. Participant 1 said the relationships 
made during and after participating in the LSU AgCenter ALDP, as well as the perspective 
gained during the program, have helped them in their business: “I’ve picked up some pretty 
good-sized deals here recently.” Participant 12, speaking about the confidence they gained from 
the program said: “And I realized, hey, look, I’m just as qualified as some of these people, and I 
could be a contributor too” in reference to beginning to participate in community organizations 
and boards.

**Recommendations**

To most accurately characterize the effectiveness of ALDPs, a larger-scale longitudinal 
study is needed. Aiding in this initiative would be the use of a standardized evaluation tool 
provided by IAPAL with access to results for member programs. As stated previously, this was
partially the intent of the initiative to establish LPOM. Since this study focused on the LSU AgCenter ALDP, there are several recommendations for program leadership to consider. For example, in the future, a greater emphasis on data collection regarding impacts could reveal quantifiable programmatic outcomes related to the skills enhanced. There is also an opportunity for pre- and post-program surveys as well as a survey of alumni for documenting long-term impacts. Some of the data collection could help to determine the affective outcomes of the program. The initial 12 interviews uncovered significant, in some cases, changes in attitude vis a vis other areas of agriculture. One final area for improvement of the LSU AgCenter ALDP is related to the recruitment of new participants. It is clear that most program participants have connections to program alumni. Since the diversity of ideas and perspectives proved to be memorable and formative for many alumni, there should be a consideration for intentionally recruiting applicants from non-traditional sectors of Louisiana agriculture. This focus on increasing the diversity of ideas will benefit the program and all participants overall.

Beyond diversity of agricultural experience, special attention should be given to inviting applicants from minority and underrepresented groups. For example, the lack of racial diversity in this study was a product of the lack of representation of this population in the larger program over time. One potential pool of applicants is people who have completed other leadership programs, such as the Small Farmer Agricultural Leadership Training Institute created by the 1890 land-grant universities. Although Louisiana Farm Bureau members are good applicants, they tend to be focused on row crop agriculture. Similarly, because of the significant amount of word of mouth recruiting done by graduates and the relative homogeneity of previous classes, applicants from smaller sectors within Louisiana agriculture are a small minority. Although the data has not been analyzed, the demographics of the LSU AgCenter ALDP over the long-term
appear to mirror the demographics of people involved in Louisiana agriculture. Based on comments from interview participants, there is an opportunity to enhance aspects of the classroom learning experience. Participants would likely benefit from a deeper dive into personality assessments and leadership theory. There is also an interest in a higher-level ALDP. Using a model common in extension, there would likely be interest from program alumni in a master’s or advanced ALDP, perhaps as a shorter program or focused on a particular topic. Overall, one participant summarized it appropriately when they said that the program’s fundamentals are strong, but the LSU AgCenter leadership must continue to innovate and adapt the program to make sure it does not become stagnant.

The theoretical lenses utilized by this study, social capital theory and adult learning theory are not often combined in qualitative research. There are other theories, such as human capital theory and generative learning theory that were also considered for this study. Ultimately the two selected theories provide richer context to the data, especially the perspectives shared by interview participants. With this combination of theories, there is potential to develop a model to link and refine the connection between social capital theory and adult learning theory more concretely. With relationships as one of the most foundational outcomes of ALDPs, additional research on ALDPs should continue to examine the outcomes that could be described as secondary or resulting from networking and relationship building. A larger study of several ALDPs would be well-positioned to make novel conclusions using social capital theory and adult learning theory.

Discussion

Although historic and successful, overall, there is a lack of academic study of ALDPs in published literature. The LSU AgCenter ALDP is anecdotally considered to be very strong, but
this thesis was only the second study and the first in more than a decade. This study of the LSU AgCenter ALDP can be a reference for other ALDPs especially regarding the reported outcomes as told by graduates reflecting on their experiences. This study builds the body of literature about ALDPs and echoes many themes covered by previous research. For Louisiana and the LSU AgCenter, this study creates an official record of the outcomes often articulated about the program, but that have not been thoroughly documented. Importantly, this study cataloged the perspectives of graduates from the last 20 years of the LSU AgCenter ALDP. It is my hope that this study could serve as a foundation for other researchers as well as ALDP leaders who continually strive to improve their programs.
Appendix. Institutional Review Board Approval

TO: Andrew Schade
LSU Ag Center | Dept | Agricultural and Extension Education and Evaluation | CC00946

FROM: Michael Keenan
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: 03-Mar-2023

RE: IRBAG-23-0029

TITLE: A Generative Leadership Analysis of the LSU AgCenter’s Leadership Development Program: A 20 Year Update

SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial Application
Review Type: Exempt
Risk Factor: Minimal
Review Date: 03-Mar-2023
Status: Approved
Approval Date: 03-Mar-2023
Approval Expiration Date: 02-Mar-2026
Re-review frequency: (three years unless otherwise stated)
Number of subjects approved: 25
LSU Proposal Number:

By: Michael Keenan, Chair

Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU’s Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects.*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
8. SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.

*All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU’s Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents.

Mike Keenan O 225-578-1708
209 Knapp Hall

O 225-578-1708

F 225-578-4443
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Vita

Andrew Joseph Schade, was born in Reading, Pennsylvania and received his Bachelor’s degree in Theology and Religious Studies from The Catholic University of America in 2010. Not from a farming family, his exposure to and interest in agriculture developed later in life, after meeting his wife’s grandfather, a retired rice farmer and cattleman from Esther, Louisiana. Mr. Schade has worked at the Louisiana State University (LSU) AgCenter since 2018. He plans to receive his Master’s degree in May, 2024.