

FSLI Project Impact Statement



College of Agricultural &
Environmental Sciences
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Developing Leadership Succession in the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences at the University of Georgia

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Background: Internal leadership succession planning within our college has been difficult in recent years. Although attracting external talent has benefits, “outside” hires also mean onboarding time for the new leader to learn the job, the culture, and the people; a sense of uncertainty and risk among faculty, students, staff, and stakeholders; loss of institutional memory, and more.

In the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences at Georgia, we have taken important steps and built great momentum toward the goals established in our most recent strategic plan. We have launched exciting initiatives such as the Institute for Integrative Precision Agriculture (IIPA), Grand Farm IPA Demonstration Farm, FABricate Entrepreneurial Initiative, Regenerative Bioscience Center, Center for Food Safety, Rural Scholars Program, Women in Agriculture Leadership Initiative, cutting edge new graduate programs, increases in federal funding and research expenditures, an enrollment growth and recruiting plan, and a new office for international programs.

Many of these exciting ideas, programs, and initiatives were born out the innovative thinking and “outside the box” experience that external hires have brought to the College in the last five years. A new Dean (external hire), new Associate Dean for Academic and Faculty Affairs (external hire), six new Department Heads (almost all external hires), and new Associate Deans for Research and Extension have resulted in massive change and all (good and bad) that comes with it. We worry about maintaining institutional memory and the sense of stability for faculty, staff, and stakeholders that come with a mix of familiar and new faces in key roles. Given the recent climate of change and opportunities and challenges facing our college at this time, we see the need for an internal leadership pool made up of people who are ready to hit the ground running with no need for introductions and a steep learning curve.

The problem and questions to consider: Faculty willingness to consider leadership positions and the talent pool that emerges within CAES has been mixed, at best. For example, younger faculty might be hopeful about contributing to change, but don't know what they're getting into—and either avoid the leadership discussion or boldly (naively) approach it without understanding the big picture. Mid-career faculty may still have too much to prove in their disciplines or are looking for roles that will serve as stepping stones to more prestigious positions. And another group, regardless of age or rank, just isn't interested in working this hard.

To address the problem, key questions are emerging:

1. What value do existing CAES faculty see in taking on leadership roles? What are the reasons why they are reluctant to seek leadership positions within their departments or the College? How, specifically, might messaging and education address their hesitancy and speak to their values?
2. From those efforts, how do we best identify and cultivate talented service-minded individuals who are interested in leadership?

That's when the task becomes challenging. Many of our faculty have already participated in leadership training – LEAD21, Advancing Georgia's Leaders in Forestry and Agriculture, or other discipline-specific programs. However, university administration requires more than a leadership mindset and competencies. University administration requires more than being an expert in one's field or a great scientist.

This project is intended to create an evidence-based plan for developing among promising members of the CAES community a longer list of necessary attitudes, values, and behaviors for excellent CAES leadership: Broad subject matter expertise (or at least a working language of the disciplines within the College); interpersonal skills; an understanding of how academic leadership differs from other types; familiarity with university structure, policies, politics, and upper administration; sensitivity to stakeholders, the political and cultural climate impacting the College and higher education in general; and expertise in the particular administrative role, and more.

Project Objectives and Outcomes:

1. Assess CAES faculty regarding their willingness and reluctance to seek leadership within the College. Using these data and evidence:
2. Design and create programming and initiatives aimed at creating synergistic competencies: leadership, communication, and administrative knowledge and skills specific to our College and its larger immediate context (UGA and the state of Georgia's stakeholders, commodities, and agricultural industries).
3. Create a supportive culture that will encourage leadership succession and internal interest in leadership through formal programming and informal means.
4. Write a proposal and budget for a pilot test and long-term implementation of this program.

Statement of Potential Impact:

Developing a formal leadership succession program within the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CAES) at the University of Georgia has the potential to create significant and lasting impact across the College's Academic, Research, and Extension missions.

At a time of substantial institutional growth and external change, intentional succession planning is both a human resources strategy and a strategic imperative for ensuring excellence.

Over the past several years, CAES has benefited tremendously from the innovation, energy, and fresh perspective brought by external hires in key leadership roles. New college and departmental leaders have helped launch transformative initiatives, strengthen research productivity, expand enrollment planning, and position the College for future growth. However, heavy reliance on external hiring also creates challenges, including onboarding delays, loss of institutional memory, uncertainty among faculty and staff, and disruption in stakeholder relationships. A stronger internal leadership pipeline would provide balance by ensuring that experienced, trusted, and institutionally knowledgeable faculty are prepared to step into leadership roles when opportunities arise.

The greatest impact of this program would be the development of a sustainable leadership culture in which leadership preparation is viewed as a normal and valued part of faculty development rather than an unexpected career diversion. Faculty often hesitate to pursue leadership because they lack clarity about the responsibilities involved, feel unprepared for administrative work, or perceive leadership roles as disconnected from their scholarly identity and values. By providing intentional programming, mentorship, administrative exposure, and leadership pathways, this initiative would reduce uncertainty and help faculty see leadership as meaningful service rather than unwanted bureaucracy.

This program would also improve leadership quality by developing competencies specific to academic administration. Successful university leaders require far more than disciplinary expertise or general leadership skills. They must understand institutional governance, faculty affairs, budgeting, stakeholder management, communication, and the political and cultural context surrounding higher education and agriculture in Georgia. Preparing faculty in these areas before they assume leadership positions would improve transition success, reduce costly learning curves, and strengthen decision-making across the College.

Additionally, the program would support talent retention and faculty engagement. High-potential faculty who feel seen, developed, and supported are more likely to remain invested in the institution and contribute to its long-term success. Creating clearer internal pathways for advancement also signals organizational trust and commitment, which can strengthen morale and encourage service-minded leadership across departments.

Ultimately, this initiative would position CAES to lead proactively rather than reactively. Instead of scrambling during leadership vacancies, the College would cultivate a ready pool of capable internal candidates who understand the mission, the people, and the strategic direction of CAES and UGA. This continuity would protect momentum, preserve stakeholder confidence, and ensure that the College remains agile, stable, and competitive in an increasingly complex higher education environment.

Leadership succession planning is, at its core, an investment in institutional resilience. By building intentional systems for identifying and preparing future leaders, CAES will strengthen the people in a position to lead next, and its own historic foundation for excellence.

The Role of FSLI in Strengthening this Project

FSLI was highly influential on my thinking and decisions related to this project. The program reinforced for me the complexity of leadership within colleges of agriculture and the importance

of intentionally preparing for that responsibility. FSLI also helped demystify those challenges. Several components of FSLI were particularly impactful and helped refine my perspective on leadership development and succession planning. These included systems thinking, the importance of overcommunicating, the value of cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary collaboration, and the unique complexity of managing external stakeholder relationships within colleges of agriculture. These elements of the program strengthened my understanding that effective leadership development must extend beyond traditional leadership training to include institutional awareness, strategic communication, and a deep appreciation for the broader context in which agricultural colleges operate.