

## Building Tomorrow's Leaders: Skills and Competencies Developed through the Tennessee State University NEXTGEN Scholarship Program

### *Abstract*

*Over time, scholars have emphasized the importance of developing core competencies such as critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability among youth to address 21st-century challenges (Lancelot et al., 2019; Lerner et al., 2005). Additionally, youth leadership development is credited with enhancing “educational completion, workforce readiness, civic engagement, social trust, cultivating social capital”, (Dugan et al., 2023, p.4) and closing the opportunity gap especially among minority students and students from low-income families (YMCA, n.d.). To cause meaningful change, Tennessee State University (TSU) received an \$18 million grant from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) through the “From Learning to Leading: Cultivating the Next Generation of Diverse Food and Agriculture Professionals” program. The primary goal is to build and sustain a future workforce in the critical fields of Food, Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Human Sciences (FANHS) (Clark, 2023; NIFA, 2023). The scholarship program portion of the NEXTGEN grant supports students to complete FANHS degree programs, prepare them for the world of work, and enhance their leadership skills and competencies. The NEXTGen scholarship program fosters academic, professional, and personal growth for students by addressing barriers such as financial constraints and limited access to opportunities. Centered around the Lerner et al., (2005)’s Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework, the program emphasizes psychological, behavioral, and social qualities of competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring for others to empower program participants. To evaluate its impact on students, a qualitative study was undertaken involving 32 scholarship program participants. Findings highlight six key themes: academic and professional skill development, confidence-building, networking, fostering responsibility, ethical values, and future aspirations. Also, participants reported transformative experiences, including improved critical thinking, resilience, and relationship-building, as well as a deepened commitment to community engagement and social responsibility. Research implications extend beyond the program, demonstrating the scalability of PYD-informed leadership initiatives. The NEXTGEN scholarship program’s integration of financial support, experiential learning, and mentorship provides valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and industry leaders, reinforcing the need for continued investment in inclusive, experiential learning programs that prepares a diverse workforce and future leaders to navigate evolving professional landscapes.*