Nutrition programs operated by Cooperative Extension organizations seek to provide nutrition education to a low-income audience nationally. There is research on the effectiveness of these programs, but gaps exist on the role of the leader and how their practices impact the educators and the programs as a whole. A transformative mixed-methods approach was used to capture both quantitative and qualitative data through a theoretical lens. Sustainable leadership and employee engagement were used as conceptual frameworks. Open-ended interviews with twelve leaders of Extension nutrition programs were conducted. An online survey was distributed to 100 nutrition educators to determine their perceptions of their leaders’ sustainable leadership practices and also a personal employee engagement inventory, with a 63% return rate. The analysis of these interviews and surveys found that both the leaders and the educators reported the use of sustainable leadership practices by program leaders.

The qualitative portion of the study revealed six of the seven leadership traits were described by the leaders during their interviews. Also, there was no significant relationship between the reported levels of sustainable leadership practices by the leaders and the educators. From the employee engagement inventory, the educators averaged an average level of employee engagement. Lastly, there was a significant positive relationship between the use of sustainable leadership and educator employee engagement. The use of sustainable leadership and the relationship between employee engagement can have implications for these programs nationally. This and future research on leadership and its impact on employee engagement can help inform policy and practice within national nutrition programs.