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North Dakota Leadership Training Boosts Confidence and Involvement

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Abstract: *Effective leadership is critical for communities as they work to maintain their vitality and sustainability for years to come. The purpose of the study reported here was to assess confidence levels and community engagement of community leadership program participants in North Dakota State University Extension programs. Through a survey administered to 196 program participants, a statistically significant increase was shown in self-confidence as well as in community organizational involvement and leadership.*

Introduction

Communities frequently face multiple issues surrounding vitality and sustainability

that demand good leadership (Emery, Fernandez, Gutierrez-Montes, & Flora, 2007). The North Dakota State University (NDSU) Extension Service as well as Cooperative Extension's North Central Region of community, economic development, and leadership professionals believe increasing the capacity of existing and emerging leaders through leadership education will contribute to community vitality in all sectors (North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, 2011).

Leadership training is done by NDSU Extension personnel regularly, and skill development serves as a short-term outcome in each program. The leadership skills developed vary based on the respective program offered, but medium- and long-term outcomes of all NDSU Extension leadership programming include increased confidence and increased community or organizational involvement. Leadership programs currently provided by the NDSU Extension Service include the Horizons Leadership Program, North Dakota County Leadership cohorts, Rural Leadership North Dakota Programs, Generational Leadership Programs, and the North Dakota 4-H Ambassador Program. All groups were included in the study reported here.

1. The Horizons Leadership program is an 18-month community-based leadership program designed to explore poverty and other challenges rural communities face. Participants are involved in a community conversation, leadership training, and strategic planning for their community.
2. The North Dakota County Leadership Program is a 9-month cohort program designed to (1) build confidence and leadership skills for participants, (2) increase the number of individuals running for office or volunteers to serve on local committees, and (3) increase awareness of the assets and services available in the county.
3. Rural Leadership North Dakota is an 18-month statewide leadership program that prepares and develops leaders to strengthen rural North Dakota. The program includes seminars with experts; on-site tours/presentations; meetings with agriculture and community development sectors; international experiences; and personal skill development.
4. The Rural Leadership North Dakota Short Course is a five-session leadership program that covers topics including effective communications, behavioral styles, managing conflict, and civic engagement. The short course prepares and develops leaders to strengthen rural North Dakota.

5. The Generational Leadership programs focus on working with individuals from multiple generations. At the end of these interactive sessions, participants come away with a better understanding of generational strengths and differences and the role they play in relationships.

6. The North Dakota 4-H Ambassador program targets young adults ages 16 to 22 and engages them in many leadership roles, including enhancing and promoting the North Dakota 4-H Youth program, acting as an advisor for 4-H youth ideas and concerns, assisting in the planning and organizing of the North Dakota State Extension Youth Conference, and other state functions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the quantitative study was to assess confidence levels and community volunteer engagement of participants in NDSU Extension leadership programs from 2007 to 2011.

This purpose was accomplished through the following research questions:

1. Have learners increased their confidence to lead others?

2. Are learners reporting new roles and taken volunteer opportunities?

3. Have learners increased their degree of engagement in leadership activities within organizations and/or communities?

Literature Review

For many years the Cooperative Extension system has been evaluating the impacts of community leadership programs provided by Extension staff (Diem & Nikola, 2005, Dhanakumar, Rossing, & Campbell, 1996; Earnest, 1996; Radhakrishna & Sinasky, 2005; Schauber & Kirk, 2001). In these studies an increase in participant confidence, self-efficacy, and increased involvement in communities and organizational activities are common themes. From youth in the 4-H program to adults in local leadership programs, the impacts of Extension leadership education are clear.

Astroth and Haynes (2002) found that 4-H youth were more likely to develop self-confidence and to take on community leadership roles than their non-4-H counterparts. Radhakrishna and Sinasky (2005) found similar results in 4-H alumni. These outcomes have also been supported by the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development. Lerner, Lerner, and colleagues (2009) found that 4-H youth

were three times more likely than other youth to have higher scores in contribution (giving back to the community). These 4-H youth also had higher civic identity and civic engagement scores than non-4-H youth (Lerner et al. 2009).

When looking at results pertaining to adults engaged in Extension community leadership programming, Diem and Nikola (2005) found participants reported a greater degree of confidence in themselves and their ability to provide leadership after completing the program. Earnest (1996) found community leadership program participants increased their levels of self-confidence and were driven to become more civically engaged.

Research from outside of Extension also supports community leadership development building the aforementioned skills. Keating (2011) found that people who participate in community leadership programs are far more likely to add to their total number of community organization memberships than those who did not participate in such programs. Jennings (2009) found that leadership program participants developed confidence and efficacy that propelled them to seek new leadership experiences after the program was completed, and 66% stated that gaining new knowledge of their skills affected their self-efficacy.

According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is a belief about oneself. "Efficacy belief is a major basis of action. Perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p.3). Bandura goes on to say, "beliefs of personal efficacy affect aspirations to leadership" (1997, p. 448).

After surveying 1,443 participants in 43 community leadership programs across the United States, Bono, Shen, and Snyder (2010, p.330) found that "the majority of participants engaged in at least one new community activity and one new leadership activity following program completion (78% and 61% respectively)."

Methods

The population for the survey reported here included adult participants in the North Dakota Horizons, Rural Leadership North Dakota, Generational Leadership, local county leadership, and North Dakota 4-H Ambassadors programs. Individuals completing each program were asked to participate in the study. Participants were from North Dakota and ranged in age from 18 to 85. There was some duplication if individuals participated in more than one NDSU Extension leadership program.

The survey items were selected from existing assessments and inventories (Pigg,

2001; Black & Earnest, 2009). A retrospective post- and pre-test methodology (Klatt & Taylor-Powell, 2005) was used to identify pre- and post- scores for each participant. Statements related to changes in confidence levels and changes in actual organizational and community involvement were included in the instrument. The survey was constructed using a four-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (not at all confident) to 4 (very confident) for 12 items measuring confidence levels. Three items measuring the number of volunteer organizations participants were involved in were included as well as six demographic items. Internal validity measured by Cronbach's alpha for the instrument was 0.92.

Data Collection

The survey on confidence and leadership activities was distributed to participants in each of the North Dakota leadership programs at the conclusion of the final training experiences. North Dakota 4-H Ambassadors over age 18 were asked to complete the survey at the completion of their tenure as Ambassadors. Surveys were distributed by an Extension agent working with each respective group, and 196 were returned for the study. More females (74.2%) than males (25.8%) completed the survey, and this reflects the gender participation in these North Dakota leadership programs. A majority of the respondents were white (97.4%), were in the 40-59 year age range (52.7%), and reported volunteering in their communities from 6-20 hours each month (54.6%).

Results

A paired sample *t-test* was used on each survey item to determine the difference in pre- and post-test scores. Adults reported changes in confidence levels after participating in North Dakota leadership programs. Table 1 provides an overview of the 12 initial survey items as well as the mean scores of the pre- and post- for each item.

Table 1.
Comparison of Adult Confidence Levels Before and After the North Dakota Leadership Training

Survey Item	Mean Score Before	Mean Score After	Mean Difference	T-Value
I can lead discussions in				

my community about issues	2.40	3.31	.91	14.97*
I can use my leadership skills in a variety of settings	2.57	3.46	.89	13.80*
I can lead volunteer organizations	2.71	3.39	.68	10.33*
I am an ethical leader	3.11	3.52	.41	8.14*
I am a positive role model to others	2.96	3.47	.51	9.64*
I could do as good a job in public office as most people	2.42	3.20	.78	12.43*
I talk optimistically about the future of my community	2.84	3.51	.67	9.91*
I feel comfortable contacting key leaders in my community about issues	2.63	3.51	.88	11.95*
I believe that my opinion matters	2.78	3.51	.73	10.86*
I know how to get involved in my community	2.82	3.64	.82	11.81*
I understand how to work well with others	2.97	3.62	.65	11.08*
I plan to take on new leadership roles	2.53	3.31	.78	11.26*
* Indicates mean scores were statistically different at $p < .001$				

Table 2 provides an overview of current and past involvement in volunteer organizations.

Table 2.

Comparison of Adult Community and Organizational
Involvement Before and After North Dakota Leadership Training

Survey Item	Mean Score Before	Mean Score After	Mean Difference	T- Value
Number of volunteer organizations involved in	3.56	4.52	.96	7.17*
Number of organizations active in	2.90	3.88	.98	7.00*
Number of organizations hold a leadership role in	2.01	2.56	.55	5.03*
* Indicates mean scores were statistically different at $p < .001$				

Conclusions and Implications

Participants reported a statistically significant increase in all survey items in the two research areas of confidence levels and community organizational involvement.

These changes indicate participants see themselves as having more capacity to work in their communities and help move the community or organization forward.

Participants rated themselves higher in all 12 survey items that dealt with confidence levels after participating in leadership programs. This increased capacity gives a voice to community members and provides a feeling of self-efficacy. It enables them to take a proactive rather than reactive stance. It empowers them to make changes to improve the current situation of the community or organization by contacting key leaders, getting involved in their community and taking on some leadership roles themselves.

Survey results indicate participants are taking on new leadership roles, increasing the number of organizations they are active in, and increasing the number of leadership roles in those organizations. Participants who believe in themselves and have more self-confidence may be better equipped to contribute to their community and the vitality of that community.

When community and organizational involvement was tested before and after leadership training, post-training participants are more willing to give their time in volunteer roles and hold leadership positions. Efforts such as this can help address issues communities and organizations face around sustaining their viability.

These findings support the work of numerous previous leadership studies in and outside of Extension (Astroth & Haynes, 2002; Bono et al., 2010; Diem & Nikola, 2005; , et al. 1996; Earnest, 1996; Jennings, 2009; Radhakrishna & Sinasky, 2005; Schauber & Kirk, 2001).

Recommendations

Confidence levels and community volunteer engagement increased after participants completed an NDSU Extension Service leadership program. This positive increase indicates that NDSU Extension Service should continue to offer these programs to their clientele.

Recommendations for further study include surveying NDSU Extension Service leadership program participants to gauge confidence levels and community volunteer engagement as more time elapses from their leadership program experience. This longitudinal study of participants would include qualitative examples of specific impacts, leadership positions held, roles taken, organizations participants were involved in, and community projects completed.

Another recommendation would include conducting a 360-degree feedback survey with selected individuals who know and work with the leadership participant in the community. This assessment would further document increases in confidence, efficacy, community and organizational involvement.

Communities across the United States continue to evolve due to social, economic, and demographic changes. Increasing the capacity of existing and emerging leaders through leadership education will remain crucial to maintain their vitality. With its long history of providing this kind of education, Extension has a key role in training and providing successful, confident, and engaged community leaders for the future.

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