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Who Lives in Rural Minnesota:

A Region in Transition

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The Power of Invitation: The West Central Leadership Academy Joyce Hoelting, Peter Caldwell, and Mary Ann Hennen

In June of 2011, 22 men and women graduated from a leadership education program in west central Minnesota. Such events are not rare in Minnesota. When the Bush Foundation recently set out to identify leadership education programs, they found over 200 programs in their three-state philanthropic region. Most are in Minnesota.

The graduating class of the West Central Leadership Academy (WCLA) gathers clients and some staff from each of seven human service organizations in the region. In this leadership education program, participants came into the program because they receive services in their community, but they leave being of greater service to their communities, using new skills and a new understanding of their own power.

Four Community Action Programs (Lakes & Prairies, Mahube, Otter Tail-Wadena, and West Central Minnesota Area) and three nonprofit organizations (Northern Connections, Rural Minnesota CEP, and the United Way of Douglas and Pope Counties) made the program happen in partnership with the West Central Initiative, which funds the program, and the University of Minnesota Extension, which designs and delivers the educational curriculum. Since 2010, the co-sponsoring organizations have extended invitations to their low-income clients to join the Academy. As a result, these Minnesotans were given an opportunity to see themselves in a different light; to grow their skills and networks; and to become part of the fabric of leadership available to this part of rural Minnesota.

After managing three leadership education cohorts for the

program, the partners are confident that WCLA shows great promise for the west central region and that it offers valuable insights to other networks and organizations interested in growing the amount and quality of rural leadership. Alumni of the program have also expressed confidence in the program by recommending it to others. "It was a lot more difficult to recruit for the first class than the second," notes Steve Nagle, Executive Director of West Central Minnesota Community Actions, Inc.

In this article, we explore the benefits of inviting people with low incomes, as well as those who advocate for them, into leadership education experiences – for their own development, for the organizations and causes that need to solve complex problems, and for rural communities that need more residents willing and able to fill leadership positions. This article also describes the program and shares results of an in-depth program evaluation.

Re-kindling a mission for people in poverty

West Central Initiative (WCI), the regional community foundation that funded the West Central Leadership Academy, is part of the reason that leadership education thrives in west central Minnesota. Over the past decade, the Foundation has invested \$274,000 in scholarships and programs focused on community leadership development.

Still, in 2010, WCI started to see requests for scholarship dollars waning. According to Program Director Wendy Merrick, "No

new program or communities had applied for community leadership development grants in recent years. Some of the communities that do access funds were doing so less

"Our most valuable assets in west central Minnesota are the people who live and work here. We value relationships with people who care about the future of the region and work with those who want to contribute their time, talents and resources to help make the future brighter for generations to come."

— West Central Initiative
Strategic Plan, 2012-2016

frequently.”

It was time for West Central Initiative to refresh its stake in leadership education.

Steve Nagle and others who managed programs for people in poverty in west central Minnesota has not been as delighted as others with Minnesota’s leadership programs. “Sure, there were programs. But the population we work with aren’t included in those opportunities.”

When the war on poverty helped Community Action Programs take root in the ‘60’s, it heralded a new strategy to invite people in poverty to lead local initiatives. This invitation was wired into the mission and structure of Community Action. “At the heart of Community Action is the empowerment of people who are poor – getting them active in their communities. That is designed into the agency. It’s very important work for us,” said Nagle. In fact, a third of the members of his agency’s board of director positions are community members with low incomes.

But Nagle has seen the number of opportunities for people with low incomes to show leadership shrink since the early days. The emphasis on leadership among people with low incomes hasn’t gotten attention in recent years.

What happened?

According to Nagle, the shift has been an unintended consequence of the expansion of organizational missions. As agencies have gotten bigger and new funding sources have been tapped, organizations started to “do a lot of stuff that doesn’t prioritize giving power and opportunity to people in poverty. More and more, agencies offer programs designed at the national level, so people who are poor have less input in local programs.”

Nagle has seen locally driven initiatives make a difference. One example he recalls with pride brought Community Action into a housing initiative. In collaboration with the Department of Corrections, Community Action built over 100 houses for people of low and modest income, involving local prisoners in the construction. Prisoners picked up carpentry and building skills and were introduced to being part of the work force. Nagle watched members of the crew move out into society

and buy some of the houses they had built. “This wouldn’t have happened with a cookie-cutter approach,” he said.

The commitment of these organizations in bringing their clients into leadership positions comes from a bone-deep belief in their mission. Steve Nagle sees it this way: “The most important thing we can do to move people out of poverty is to give them opportunity. Energy assistance is important; all assistance is important. But really escaping poverty is about taking control.”

The Power of Invitation: To Address the Rural Leadership Gap

Research conducted by University of Minnesota Extension fellow Ben Winchester examined data to better understand the need for leaders in rural Minnesota. By adding together the number of nonprofits and government jurisdictions, and considering the number of board and elected positions needed by these entities, he has estimated that, conservatively, one in 34 people must serve in leadership positions in rural areas, compared to one in every 143 residents in major metropolitan counties (Winchester, pending).

In developing its most recent strategic plan, the West Central Initiative crunched some numbers, too. WCI compared its nine-county area of the state to an urban area with a similar population base — Washington County. They found that in government alone, the West Central region must find 935 more leaders to hold elected office in counties, cities, townships and school districts than Washington County (West Central Initiative, 2011).

The hunt for these leaders is often thwarted because such positions are not compensated as full-time positions and do not pay a wage similar to those in urban areas. For example, consider the wages of county commissioners. Of those counties in WCI’s region who reported annual commissioner

“People used to tell me that I had leadership qualities. But I missed it.”

“I felt that people were born leaders, but learned that leaders can be made and that even I can be a leader.”

wages to the Association of Minnesota Counties, the differences in total compensation for county commissioners ranged from 40% to 69% less than those reported for county commissioners in Washington County (Association of Minnesota Counties, 2011). It is likely that city government pays less, and some elected positions in townships are volunteer positions.

WCI also notes that elected leaders in rural communities have less administrative support, making their jobs harder. “Rural community leaders rarely have much in the way of staff support and expertise to back them up. The entire staff of a typical small city in the region (about 1,000 people) consists of two to four people. Usually, this includes a maintenance chief who must do almost everything to keep the city’s infrastructure functioning, and a city clerk who must do all the paperwork to keep the city running. Occasionally, it may include some additional part- or full-time help (West Central Initiative, 2011).

In light of this, one would think that most local residents are asked to lead. A look at Blandin’s Rural Pulse study, a survey conducted by the Blandin Foundation in 2010, shows that that is not the case. When rural residents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed that “people from different backgrounds fill leadership roles within my community,” 52% agreed and 43% disagreed.

Further, 41% said “no” when they were asked, “Have you ever been invited to serve in a leadership role (e.g., for church, local nonprofit organization, youth sports, city government, etc.) in your community?” (Blandin Foundation, 2010).

Demographics clearly play a role in whether residents are asked to serve. Older residents, those with high incomes, and business owners were most likely to say their leadership was requested. Clearly, the constituents of the Community Action Programs were being overlooked — at least in 2010.

The Power of Invitation: To inform public decisions.

Efforts to engage new populations in community leadership pays off. Harvard University researchers Archon Fung and Elena Fagotto conducted case studies in communities where deliberative dialog had happened with

diverse community members. They uncovered a number of direct positive outcomes, including:

- Improved understanding among the community members of the reasons for various public policies and a better grasp by local government of the public's priorities and sensitivities;
- Successful redistricting;
- Formation of tenant associations that ultimately improved living conditions and rid neighborhoods of crime;
- Boosted participation of minority parents in schools; and,
- Improved accessibility of child care (Fagotto and Fung, 2009).

The U.S. Department of Transportation recommends strategies that engage under-represented populations as a best practice when communities are concerned with producing workable solutions. Participation from diverse experiences of race and income provide fresh perspectives. They give first-hand information about issues and concerns that traditional leaders may not understand. They root out potential controversy before it occurs and widen the base of consensus on a given plan or project (U.S. Department of Transportation).

Engaging all demographics in local decisions shifts the poverty barriers and mindset. As a result, individuals and communities see huge growth in active volunteering. Collaborative and group control allows more members to create change regardless of economic or political stakes. This approach is essential in building community capacity (Riveria and Erlich, 1995).

The Power of Invitation: To Change Lives

New research on the effects of being identified as a "leader" has proven a strong reciprocal effect between people's self-view as leaders and their emergence as leaders of groups. A study examined a number of small groups that moved from very loose-knit structures to functioning work groups. Using social network analysis, the study found that

“people who perceived themselves as leaders were more likely to receive leadership nominations over time...and individuals who received more leadership nominations over time were more likely to see themselves as leaders” (Emery, Daniloski and Hamby, 2011).

This perspective describes the phenomenon that occurs in communities when the same people are tapped over and over to take leadership positions, as well as the change that occurs in individuals when others invite them to participate in leadership education opportunities. Therefore, the invitation to a leadership program changes one’s “looking glass” in a way that ultimately changes their behaviors. “I felt that people were born leaders,” said one Academy program participant, “but learned that leaders can be made, and that even I can be a leader.”

Gershon and Straub (2010) argue that people who live in economic stress can benefit greatly from transformative training, including teaching strategies for solving problems, increasing the knowledge of self, and building self-awareness. As leadership education programs design curriculum, their attention to self-efficacy addresses this need (Gershon and Straub, 2010). One recent multi-state study of leadership education outcomes provides evidence for that argument. “Participants without a college degree had significantly higher increases in their leadership skills for the outcome indices of personal growth and efficacy, community commitment, shared future and purpose, and social cohesion. Similarly, leadership education program participants whose incomes were less than \$100,000 showed significantly greater improvements in the community knowledge indices than those whose annual incomes were above \$100,000. Finally, participants who had lived in the community for a shorter period of time had significantly higher increases in the community commitment, shared future and purpose, community knowledge, and civic engagement indices than those who had lived in the community for a longer period of time” (Goodwin, et. al., 2012).

Stepping into leadership roles and engaging with others to accomplish tasks that “make a difference” happens when one

believes in his or her own efficacy — the power to produce an effect. According to Albert Bandura, self-efficacy is “the belief in one’s own capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” (Bandura, 1995). It is a person’s belief in their own ability to succeed in particular situations. One finding reported in the Rural Pulse study showed that when it comes to a sense of self-efficacy related to community engagement, 87% of rural Minnesotans said that they could “make an impact and improve local quality of life.” Of concern, however, is that those with incomes of \$35,000 or under were the least likely to believe this was true (Blandin Foundation, 2010).

Bandura and others have found that an individual’s self-efficacy plays a major role in how we approach goals, tasks, and challenges and that the growth of self-efficacy does not end during youth but continues to evolve throughout life as people acquire new skills, experiences and understanding (Bandura, 1992). He goes on to describe four influences that help us develop our self-efficacy — opportunities that leadership education cohorts provide: Mastery experiences (performing a task successfully), social modeling (witnessing other’s successful experiences), social persuasion (people being persuaded to believe that they have the capabilities and skills to succeed), and our own responses to situations (Bandura, 1994).

The West Central Leadership Academy

Part of the mission

The seven non-profit organizations that co-sponsor the West Central Leadership Academy manage a breadth of programs serving the region. These range from direct financial assistance (energy assistance, weatherization, housing assistance), to early childhood programs (Head Start, Early Head Start, child care, child care resource and referral), workforce development (counseling, job search and retention assistance), educational programming (career development, asset accumulation), senior services, and more.

What these organizations have in common is a mission to reach low-income residents of the region. Many of the

organizations follow the Community Action philosophy of placing people from the population served on the board of directors. They also each have a strong practice of partnering to assure that a breadth of services in the area are connected to each other.

Leaders of these organizations say that they invest in the Academy to create more opportunities for their clients to learn about leadership and to provide leadership. Leah Pigatti describes their organization's intent this way: "For everyone who participates, the Academy is the first-ever opportunity to examine their leadership ability and work with peers to understand their learning style and methods of interaction with others. The growth in self-esteem and confidence experienced by participants is amazing to watch. It just gives you goose bumps to see the pride of participants as they develop skills."

Not the usual suspects

The WCLA program co-sponsors knew from the start that the nominating process would be an important program component. One of the goals of the nomination process was

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Executive Director,
West Central Minnesota
Communities' Action

to choose participants from demographic groups that were not traditionally in leadership positions in the region. In this rural, traditionally white region, women, low-income residents and minority groups were under-represented in leadership positions but are over-represented in the Academy. This changes the culture of the leadership education experience, according to Wendy

Merrick. "It seems that the make-up of the participants is the most significantly different aspect (of the program). Many of these participants are attending leadership training for

the first time and feel privileged to be there as a result of the nomination process. This creates a culture of excitement and motivation in the group, which is contagious. Unfortunately, this feels the opposite of some leadership trainings I have been at, where one or two bored or jaded participants can really bring down the entire group and lose the effectiveness of the session.”

Because nomination comes from a respected organization or its staff member, program participants show high attendance and accountability. Because the financial margins of the emerging leaders in this program are narrow, the program invested financially to eliminate barriers to attendance. The program budget included a \$325 stipend to reimburse participants for transportation, child care, or wages lost due to attendance.

Table 1. Educational attainment by cohort participants (Years 1 and 2).

	Count	Percent
No high school diploma	3	8.1%
High school graduates	3	8.1%
Technical or business school graduate	6	16.2%
Some college experience	8	21.6%
College graduates	14	37.8%
Some post-college education	3	8.1%
Total number of respondents	37	100.0%

Table 2. Annual household income of cohort participants (Years 1 and 2).

	Count	Percent
Less than \$10,000	6	17.6%
More than \$10,000, less than \$20,000	7	20.6%
More than \$20,000, less than \$30,000	5	14.7%
More than \$30,000, less than \$50,000	11	32.4%
More than \$50,000, less than \$100,000	5	14.7%
Total number of respondents	34	100.0%

In the first Leadership Academy, there were 22 participants. Four were males, 18 female. One way to gauge whether participants were not in the existing fray of leadership was to examine their community connections, in particular, the number of participants who had immediate family members in the community. Given the well-known maxim that you are not a resident of rural Minnesota “until you’ve got a grandparent in the local graveyard,” people with family connections potentially have more networks, more roots, and more existing connections in the community than someone who does not. In the pilot cohort, 14 of the 22 participants (63%) had no immediate family members in the community.

Education and income levels of participants in the first two cohorts covered a wide spectrum, largely because program “slots” that could not be filled by clients of the organizations were filled by staff of the co-sponsoring organizations.

The first two groups also had a degree of ethnic diversity relative to their rural demographics. While the majority of participants have been white, two participants were American Indian, two identified as Black or African-American, two identified as Hispanic, and one identified as Asian. One participant was not a native-born U.S. citizen.

Cindy Bigger, the Extension educator who led the program, believes that participant diversity, especially age diversity, is often not found in other regional leadership programs. She agrees with Wendy Merrick that, compared to other leadership programs, many of the Academy participants are new to leadership training. Because this was a “first time” experience for participants, they were excited to be there and thus more engaged than those for whom opportunities are plenty.

Program design: Tailoring the scholarly approach.

The educational sessions were planned, led, and taught by an experienced educator from the University of Minnesota Extension’s Leadership and Civic Engagement (LCE) program staff. The LCE program team provides leadership programs for organizations and communities throughout the state. Though its core content is derived from scholarship

in leadership education and its related content areas, each program is designed to consider the context of the community, the sponsors, and the participants of the program — their life circumstances and personal motivations.

The West Central Leadership Academy pilot convened eight times for four-hour sessions over a three-month period. The sessions covered:

- Understanding leadership and your community
- Personal leadership
- Visionary leadership
- Organizational / positional leadership
- Team leadership
- Civic leadership
- Ethical leadership
- Situational leadership
- Closing session and graduation

The group, the setting, and the interaction built into the program design were carefully constructed to create new bonds between and among the participants involved, as well as between and among communities in the regions.

The first Leadership Academy took place in 2010, and the design showed great promise with strong participant response for the value of the program. The second cohort was designed using lessons from the pilot to enhance and improve the offering. The second offering finished in early June 2011. The third and current offering is under way and ended in summer of 2012, so evaluation data is not yet available.

“You have to push and pull more.” Cindy Bigger, lead educator who adapted the program for the Academy, noted that the nuances of program delivery changed to address the emerging leaders in the academy. The same newness that increased the participants’ enthusiasm caused them to be less sure of themselves and their contributions. And so, “the instructor has to push and pull more.” To adapt to the needs of participants, the educator also changed some of the leadership curricula that provided important content but were designed with more experienced leaders in mind. She made more use of step-by-step-instruction, repetition, reviewing of concepts in a variety of ways, and direct application of concepts to

participant's daily lives. She also took advantage of discussion whenever possible, seizing the opportunity to ask penetrating questions, coach, encourage, and share her own leadership experiences.

The program design made sure that participants could directly apply the concepts learned to their daily lives and goals. This was done most intentionally through the individual leadership project. Early in the course of the program, participants identified a leadership activity that they would complete before the end of the program. One participant decided to attend a city council meeting; another decided to run for public office. The participants' choices reflected the varying comfort levels of the group. Cindy Bigger described her strategy to tie the leadership concepts and skills to participants' goals. "I purposefully led participants towards leadership goals, using what they are passionate about. We routinely checked in about their goals, and I steered or encouraged as needed. The group aspect really helps with this, too. If one person shares the awesome work they are doing, others are motivated and inspired."

Bigger shares the story of one young mother who, using that coaching and motivation, called the mayor to ask whether he could visit her child's day care on Safety Day. She had just heard at the Academy that "you might hear no, but place calls to your elected officials when you want something. You might have to be persistent." With just one call to her mayor, this participant got a "yes." And the mayor also recruited a firefighter and police officer to come with him. Shared success stories like these show the group the power of their voice.

Evaluating the program

Bigger credits the co-sponsors of the program, and especially their nomination process, as a major component of the program's success. "The organizations that put this program together did their homework. They knew who to recruit, how to recruit, and how to best remove the barriers to get those who they wanted to attend to actually attend."

Evaluation of the program monitored changes in individuals as a result of the program, as well as the ultimate benefits that those individuals brought back to communities.

Table 3: Domains of community-level impacts.

Capital Definition	
Social capital	Strengthened or expanded trust and connections among people, groups and organizations.
Civic (aka Political)	Increased ability of communities to access and mobilize public resources.
Financial	Increased private and public wealth that is invested in the well being of communities.
Built capital	Improvement of structures and infrastructures that contribute to the well being of communities.
Health, Food and Nutrition	Increased ability of communities to promote physical and mental well being.
Cultural	Strengthened ability of communities to support and celebrate diverse worldviews.
Natural environment	Strengthened ability of communities to protect landscape, air, water, soil and biodiversity of both plants and animals.

Value to Individual Participants. Participants were asked to describe the degree of their development using a six-point scale in retrospect at the end of the program. The chart below describes their assessment.

As noted earlier, many participants had not thought of themselves as leaders before the invitation to the program. One participant described this perception, saying, “I don’t really know why my wife and I were nominated for this program, but we are enjoying it and learning a lot, especially about each other.” All alumni reported an above-average change in their self-confidence, stress-coping skills, and perceptions of themselves as leaders, as well as others’ perceptions of their leadership abilities. Participants said the

program helped them believe in themselves as leaders and showed that they really could be leaders. They developed skills, abilities and confidence, often for the first time. One participant shared that, “I had felt that people were born leaders, but learned that leaders can be made and that even I can be a leader. This really increased my self confidence.”

When asked about others’ perceptions of her as a leader, a participant said, “People around me always thought that I was a leader. I didn’t think so, but they did. People have made comments that they saw a real change in me since I attended the program.”

Value to the Community. The University of Minnesota Extension also conducted a study to examine the impact of the program made in organizations and communities after the program ended. This study is part of a growing strategy in Extension’s community development programs to use the Community Capitals Framework (Flora, Flora and Fey, 2004; Emery and Flora, 2006) to measure the impacts of community development. The Framework is based on the idea that every community has resources. When these resources are invested to create new resources, they become *capital*. The types of capital that make a difference in communities are described in Table 3.

As modified by the University of Minnesota Extension’s Center for Community Vitality (to reflect a more specific purpose of identifying end results of Extension programming), the Community Capital Framework refers to seven community-level domains of impact: social, health and wellness, civic, cultural, economic/financial, building/infrastructure, and natural environment capital (Chazdon et al, 2007; Rasmussen et al, 2011). Human capital and behavioral changes at the individual level are considered outcomes and are thus measured separately from the impact domains (Rasmussen et al, 2011).

Study Methodology. After the program was completed, evaluators asked program alumni and the executive directors of the referring organizations to assess the degree to which the West Central Leadership Academy program made an impact, using the Framework to understand that impact. The

Table 4: Participant’s private value (human capital) impacts.

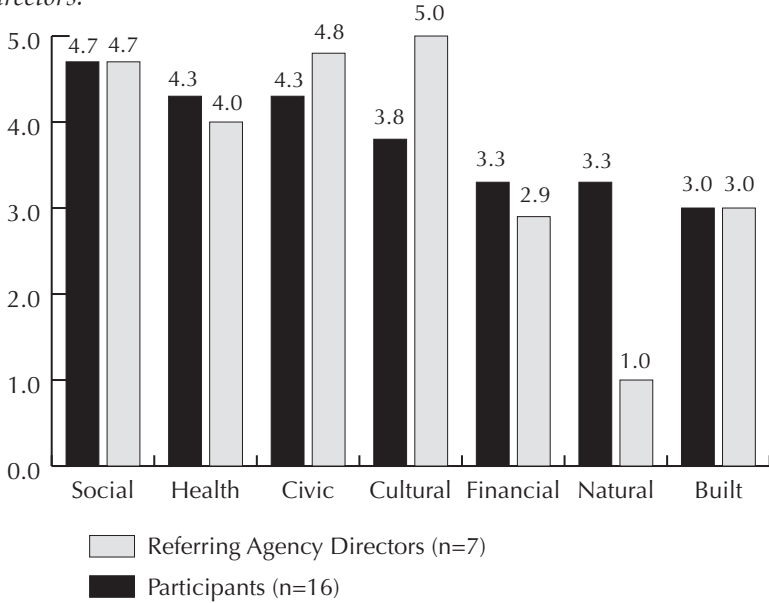
(1= No Change to 6=A Great Deal), N = 16 respondents	Average
To what degree did you experience an increase in self-confidence after participating in the program?	4.8
To what degree do you feel that others in your community or organization think of you more as a leader after completing the program than they did before you entered the program?	4.7
To what degree did your experience in the program change how you see yourself as a leader?	4.6
To what degree did your experience in the program affect your coping skills when faced with difficult or challenging situations?	4.3

interview protocol employed a simultaneous mixed methods approach (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998) to triangulate quantitative and qualitative methods (Denzin, 1989; Patton, 2002).

The method simply involved interviewing participants and the executive directors of sponsoring organizations. Participants were asked to what degree (on a scale of 1 = not at all to 6 = a great deal) they felt the Leadership Academy had prompted change. Questions were shaped in a way that acquainted the person being interviewed with the Framework’s domains. After providing a rating for each question, participants were prompted to explain the rating and give examples. In this way, the study had both quantitative and qualitative descriptions of program impact.

Community Impacts. As seen in Figure 1, scores were above average in the majority of the Framework domains. Interview responses from the executive directors also exhibit large public value gains. However, the domains with the highest impact, as can be seen in the graph of the average domain scores of each group, differ in interview groups. Executive directors (n=7) rated the cultural capital domain as having the largest public value impact, 5 (out of 6 possible). Participants, though, rated social capital as the domain where they experienced the highest degree of change (4.7). Executive

Figure 1: Comparisons of impacts identified by participants and agency directors.



directors rated political capital as the second highest domain (4.8), while participants rated political capital as a close third (4.3). For executive directors, social capital was a close third (4.7), scoring slightly higher than participants' first-rated domain, the same — social capital. While all scores were above average, participants rated social capital, health and wellness capital, political capital, and cultural capital as the highest domains. Executive directors rated cultural capital, political capital, social capital and health & wellness capital as the domains with the highest impact. These high scores in the domains show that there were significant impacts, while the qualitative narrative provided by both groups explains the specific impacts.

Finding #1: Impacts on Social Capital: Both groups reported impacts in the social capital domain as strong impacts. Protocol questions focused on how the program built new connections within organizations and communities, how the program strengthened existing connections in organizations and communities (bonding social capital); and how the program connected participants to organizations in

the community and region.

One executive director reported that as a result of the Leadership Academy, "Participants have been markedly more active in their respective communities and efforts." Another director stated, "The participants from this agency returned highly motivated. All were involved in numerous projects in the community." Regional connections were made as well. A director said he could tell the impact of the program when two staff members in the program initiated an organizational and community response to a tornado that hit a nearby town.

Participants reported that the program strengthened, extended, and connected social links. A participant who ran for mayor said, "I definitely needed to network when I was running for mayor. This strengthened connections I had, as well as new ones." Another participant without many community connections before the program stated, "By going out of my comfort zone I have gone into other areas. I work with the Salvation Army and have been called to work with fire situations in other counties on multiple occasions."

Finding #2: Health and Wellness Impacts. Health and wellness impacts did not see as much change from the perspective of the executive directors as participants, who rated the degree of change as the second most significant (4.3). One participant, encouraged by skills she learned in the program, said, "That is my dream, to start a youth center that will help the 'rejects' of society, for the youth that don't feel that they can fit in. I hope to realize this dream by the end of this year — still in the planning phase." Other participants discussed ongoing efforts in mental health outreach, domestic violence and homelessness prevention, the well being of seniors and young children, and food security for families.

Finding #3: Civic Impacts. Both groups saw significant civic impacts. Participants rated the civic domain as a close third in significance (4.3), while executive directors saw the civic domain as having the second highest impact (4.8). With the focus of the leadership academy on public and civic participation, this is understandable. Participants were instructed in how to engage with political and civic leaders and were encouraged to engage in civic leadership. Impacts

were found in both the organizational and community spheres. One participant stated, "Because of the tools and learning in the area, I have been able to open up more and give my personal thoughts and views in the organizations I am involved in." Another participant commented, "I am more comfortable speaking my mind, where I may not have said anything before."

In communities and the region, participants ran for school boards, increased membership on civic committees, ran for city council and even for mayor. One participant said, "Running the campaign for school board made me see that I could do it, despite being 'just a mom.' That I have lots to offer." For one participant, the program showed that political leadership was within grasp. She said, "I realized that yes, I can do city council. There are some council members who are not going to run again, so it's a perfect time to put my foot out there and see what happens."

This was a common theme among responses. Eight participants mentioned that the program had positively influenced thoughts of running for public office at some point in the future. The participant who ran for mayor said, "What I learned at the program was that if I had an opinion, my opinion is worth as much as the next person. If I don't voice my opinion, I have no right to complain."

Executive directors concurred that the program had great civic impacts. One said, "One participant ran for mayor of her city. Three were heavily involved in recovery efforts following a tornado."

Finding #4: Cultural Impacts. Cultural impacts of the program were also significant. Participants described increased involvement in community activities. They joined planning groups for county fairs, national nights out, and historical, cultural and civic groups. One commented that, "just running for office as a person of color in our school system is huge. I was letting people know about the issues facing our children." Executive directors rated the cultural capital domain as having had the most impact from the program. They discussed how they saw participants from their organizations become more involved in community events and celebrations and witnessed

them sharing diverse perspectives in the greater community. One participant discussed her newfound involvement with a regional program that brings cultural arts groups to area schools and events. Another, who identified herself as Native American, mentioned that she has led efforts in her culturally specific organization to reach out to other groups, to seek to understand and bridge gaps between cultures.

From the perspectives of both participants and directors, the leadership program promoted and brought about cultural diversity in both organizations and the greater community.

Finding #5: Economic/Financial Impacts. While not as quantitatively significant, impacts were also seen in the Framework domain of financial impact. One participant was so encouraged by the program that she realized her dream and started a deli with her husband in the local mall. One participant said, "While I was in the program, I wrote a grant and received the full amount.... I never saw myself as a grant writer." Other participants mentioned getting more involved in fundraising and grant writing for their organizations also. They now had the skills and confidence to do so.

Both participants and executive directors recorded large quantitative impacts and provided excellent narrative about experiences and observations. Extension Educator Cindy Bigger reinforces this finding as she describes an accidental meeting in a local store with one participant after the program. "The woman saw me and shouted my name. And she said, 'Do you know that program changed my family's life? I'd been unemployed for a year before the program. Through it, I found a job. And you know what? I've got my eye on a better one that I think I can do.'"

One director summed up the impacts and the ethos of the program, commenting that "Each of the participants are like a seedling, continuing to grow, and their impact will unfold and spread with time and nurturing from our community leadership."

Challenges

Along with the successes of the program for participants and their communities, executive directors did recognize some

drawbacks. One identified problem is that sometimes there is no outlet for the participants' newfound skills. After the programs, referring organizations were supposed to provide participants (especially staff) with leadership opportunities. According to one executive director, that is not necessarily happening. A participant mentioned that it was difficult to change anything in her organization and that she doesn't feel that she is using her newfound skills. Another recognized drawback was that there was little follow-up or continued guidance for participants. Both the educator and executive directors noted that there is no guarantee that participants are actually providing leadership in their communities. A "booster shot" of leadership training was recommended to continue the impacts. This also points to the need for a longitudinal look at the program's impact. Extension is conducting such longitudinal studies frequently now, typically examining the eventual growth in community capitals that happen as a result of new leadership that grows in programs (Rasmussen, et. al., 2011). It is particularly exciting to consider where these emerging leaders will make a difference in coming years.

Conclusion

Impacts of the West Central Leadership Academy were significant. Using an interview protocol organized around the community capitals framework, evaluators teased out powerful stories from both participants and executive directors. Participants identified huge growth in personal skills of confidence, leadership skills, and conflict resolution. Training emerging leaders provided a big payoff for both personal and public value. Part of this payoff was the increase of bonding, bridging and linking connections of social capital among the participants. The program intentionally created networks among a variety of organizations and communities. This is an important strategy for success with businesses, professional organizations, in volunteer work, and for political action. In the civic arena, the skills and motivation provided by the program spurred increased community and organizational leadership involvement among participants.

This increased involvement was important because

prior to the program, participants had little esteem for their own leadership abilities and as a result had little leadership involvement. By being chosen for the program, participants not only gained skills and confidence, they were shown that others believed in their leadership ability. The referral process, with community agencies nominating participants or staff with limited leadership experience, proved vital to program success.

As the leader of the collaboration, Wendy Merrick is pleased with the program's success and believes that the model could work in other rural areas. "There is a great skills increase. Group dynamics motivate success. While there is not necessarily lasting relationships among participants after the program, there is a strong bond during the time together that really encourages and motivates participants. The instructor is top notch, and I feel that something is going on differently in the program.... It seems that the freshness of the participants has created a motivating dynamic. These are all new leaders who are newly important and thus feel that they can make a difference. Even if there are just a few people who feel that way, it can make a huge difference in motivating the entire group."

The West Central Leadership Academy did see deep impacts. These impacts, in both private and public value, were credited to the design and delivery of the program. Perhaps the crux of this program's success was the participants, their diversity and newness to leadership, and the endorsement that came to them because they are invited to participate. Through the power of invitation comes our opportunity to tap important assets and build communities in multiple and far-reaching ways.

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