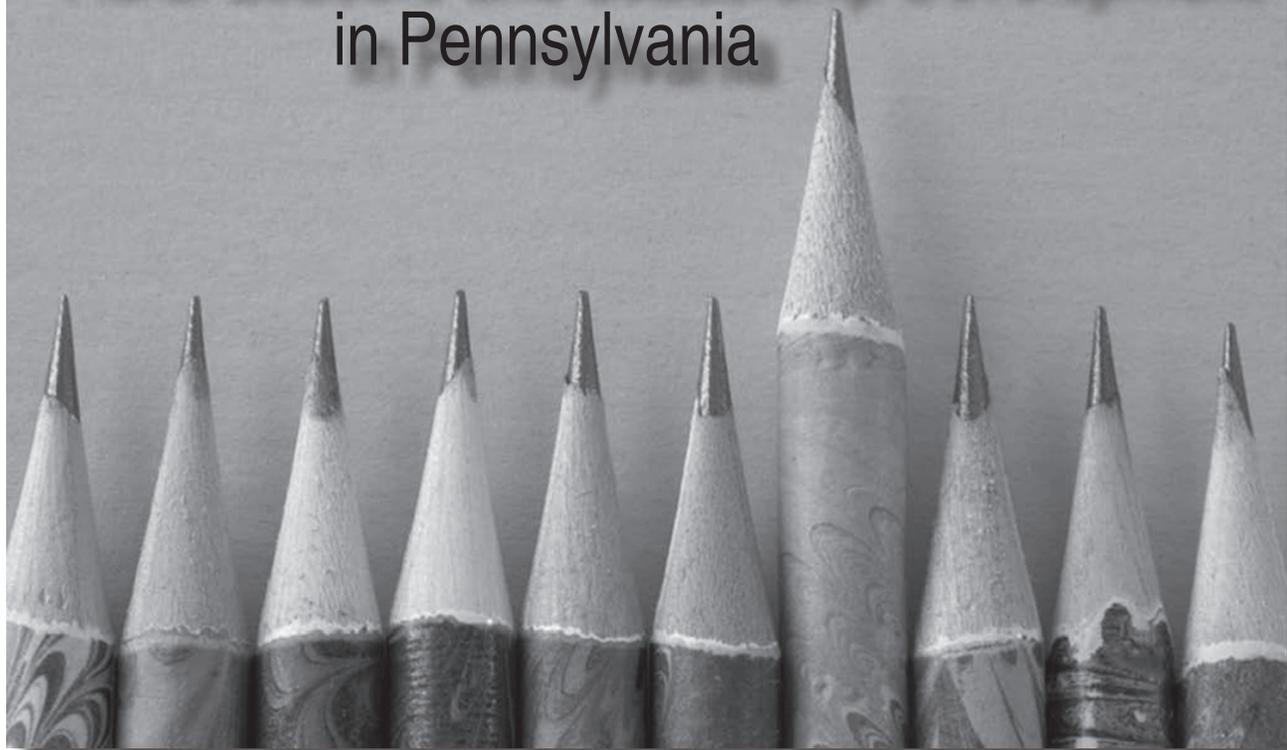


Rural Leaders and Leadership Development in Pennsylvania



The Center for



Rural Pennsylvania

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Executive Summary

Throughout Pennsylvania, rural residents have taken on leadership roles to support and promote their communities and their residents. The challenges these leaders face continue to become more complex, as economic, political, social, cultural and even global forces influence local events.

This research was conducted to understand how a sample of rural residents assumed their leadership roles and how they developed their skills to address the ever increasing challenges that impact their communities.

To conduct the study, the researchers first reviewed literature on the general models and principles of leadership. Next, they conducted in-depth interviews with rural leaders from across the state. The interview questions, both structured and unstructured, focused on the respondent's leadership skills and skill sets, career background, and leadership experiences. The researchers also conducted a focus group with six emerging rural leaders who were participating in a countywide, state-sponsored leadership program.

The researchers used the results of the literature review, the interviews and the focus group to: document the skills and personal attributes needed to be effective rural leaders; emphasize the role formal and informal training and education play in the development of rural leaders; and identify program considerations related to rural leadership development in Pennsylvania.

According to the research results, rural leaders see a clear need for improved training and educational opportunities to learn the skills and tasks specific to their position, which included budgeting, decision-making, conflict resolution, meeting facilitation, and community building.

To develop future leaders, the respondents also suggested that more formal entrepreneurial education opportunities be provided to students in grades K-12 and in workshops and seminars in rural communities. They stressed the need to attract young rural leaders and the need to put more time, money, and energy into solving the "brain drain" problem in rural communities.

Program considerations included the need for: expanded educational opportunities for existing elected and appointed rural leaders to further develop their leadership skills and perspectives; expanded recruitment strategies for leadership development program participation; more practical and experience-based leadership development programming; and a more thoughtful and engaged follow-up process for those who complete leadership development programs.

Another consideration was to develop a regional-level, rural leadership development education plan that creates more regional leadership networks. The networks would allow leaders to engage with each other at more geographically diverse levels, learn from each other in terms of successes and failures, and understand community development at a broader level.

Introduction

All communities have individuals who take on leadership roles to champion community causes and push for change. These leaders have passion, heart, and an unyielding desire to make their communities better places for generations to come. These leaders also hold an important place in the larger workings of our political, economic, social, and cultural systems.

Therefore, it is essential to learn more about these leaders and their routes to leadership so that policymakers may better support them and the communities and constituencies they represent.

A range of researchers and observers of trends in rural communities suggest that the problems and issues facing rural communities, in particular, include declining population bases, and, in a few cases, radically increasing populations, cultural changes like changing racial and ethnic composition of the workforce, economic influences like globalization, political influences like new laws, regulations, and policies, and environmental issues like environmental degradation and loss of farmland (Alter et al., 2007a, 2007b; The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2006, 2007; Jensen, 2006; Brown and Swanson, 2003; and Flora and Flora, 1993).

To say the least, the challenges facing rural communities and rural leaders are increasingly complex and greatly influenced by local events as well as global, political, social, cultural, and economic forces. These challenges have compelled rural leaders to expand their understanding of the underlying causes of the problems facing their communities, the range of possible outcomes and solutions, and the multiplicity of strategies for getting there. In other words, a new, more robust set of skills, capacities, abilities, attributes, and knowledge is required for 21st Century leaders.

While many of the skills and attributes they possess have been influenced by everyday life and experiences, others are a direct result of formal and informal leadership development education and training.

In the vast body of literature related to leadership development, very little focuses specifically on rural leadership or rural leadership development programs, and few examine the impact that various intertwined experiences and education have on individual leaders.

This research, which was conducted in 2008, looked to fill some of this void, as well as develop useful knowledge to influence policies on leadership development.

Project Goals

The research goals were to: better understand the process and experience of rural leadership development based on the experiences, stories, and insights of a small, diverse sample of rural leaders; identify techniques and strategies being employed by rural leaders to address community issues; identify ideas for developing future rural leaders;

and identify targeted resources and considerations that may help support state-sponsored and state-funded rural leadership training, education, and development programs for rural leaders across Pennsylvania.

Methodology

To complete the study, the researchers first reviewed literature on the general models and principles of leadership.

Next, they conducted 19 in-depth interviews with rural leaders from across the state. The interview questions, both structured and unstructured, focused on the respondent's skills, skill sets, career backgrounds, and leadership experience. They also conducted a focus group with six rural leaders who were participating in a countywide leadership program at the time of the study.

They then used the literature review, and the interview and focus group results to develop a profile of rural leaders and leadership development.

Literature Review

Defining leadership

A simple definition of what constitutes a leader is nearly impossible because different leaders have different strengths and weaknesses, different approaches and styles, and different ends in mind. Various situations also call for different leaders, forms of leadership, or strategies. Oftentimes, a single leader must possess many skills or styles to be successful. At other times, no single leader can possess all the requisite knowledge, skills, or perspectives to effectively lead. For the most part, one cannot easily classify the concept of leadership in a standardized way. There are no universal criteria to define leadership that apply to all forms of organizations or situations and the plethora of literature, encyclopedias, and handbooks on leadership will attest to that (Bass and Bass, 2008; Goethals et al., 2004; Hannum and Martineau, 2007; Hiebert and Klatt, 2000; Kouzes, 2003; and Young, 2009).

So what makes a good leader? History, myths and legends were peppered with leaders who possessed different sets of strengths and weaknesses and, at different times and in various places, a range of leaders and approaches to leadership gained and lost currency.

A brief history of leaders and leadership

Throughout much of history, leaders were born into position (Weber, 1948). The Pharaohs, for instance, were believed to be a reincarnation of Horus, an Egyptian deity. They were not only kings but gods. Being born into that position prevented others from having power, so those leaders were chosen because of their genealogy.

Based on these ideas, the definition of leadership in the early part of the 20th century emphasized lineage, control, and centralization of power (Rost, 1993). Looking closely at definitions and portrayals of leadership from the late

19th and early 20th Centuries, they suggest that leadership is the ability to command obedience, respect, loyalty, and cooperation (Rost, 1993; and Stone and Patterson, 2005).

A closer look suggests that leaders throughout history have used fear more than respect, reason, understanding or compassion. It is little wonder that all the way to the 1940's, military definitions of leadership could be summed up as "the art of imposing one's will upon others in such a manner as to command their obedience, their confidence, their respect, and their loyal cooperation" (Rost, 1993). During this time, Weber (1948) defined power as the ability to get one to do something even against his will.

By the 1950s, a slight but important shift began to happen regarding the perception of leadership. Scholars began to define leadership as having more to do with facilitation than actual leadership (Rost, 1993; Stone and Patterson, 2005). In other words, a leader did not necessarily have to have absolute authority when it came to making a decision.

By the 1960s, when social revolution was at its peak, the definition of leadership began to shift from an individual who has the status that permits her/him to exercise influence over the behavior of certain individuals toward the art of influencing others through persuasion and guidance (Bass, 1990; Bass and Bass, 2008; Rost, 1993; and Stone and Patterson, 2005).

The social role constituted a leader's ability to show a "people-oriented" concern for subordinates by building mutual trust, developing good interpersonal relations, being sensitive to feelings, and being open to suggestions. The task role, on the other hand, described a leader's ability to define and structure the various tasks and roles of subordinates to achieve organizational goals (Conger, 1992). This two-dimensional approach to leadership became the underlying model for most of the leadership training programs in the 1960s and 1970s.

By the 1980s, a new approach was implemented to make leadership across settings more effective, personal, and collaborative (Bass, 1990; Greenleaf et al., 2002; and Rost, 1993). Group dynamics and collaborative strategies, whose aims were to make the manager-leader and her/his subordinates work together in a more productive fashion, were introduced. Arguably, many studies have emerged that have both embraced and questioned the process and outcomes of this transition in our understanding of leadership (Day, 2000; Dubrin, 2006; Goethals et al., 2004; and Hiebert and Klatt, 2000).

Today, however, the notion of the leader sitting at the top of the hierarchy, making decisions for a group of followers, still exists in many organizations. Many scholars, activists, and leaders are working to change this perception of leadership and are continuously discussing new forms, strategies, and processes for effective leaders.

Some of these include transformational leadership, servant leadership, and participatory leadership, among oth-

ers (Bass, 1990; Ford Foundation, 2007a, 2007b; Greenleaf, 1977; Greenleaf et al., 2002; and Williams, 1999, 2005). Bass and Bass (2008) suggest that, for the purposes of their handbook, leadership is to be defined broadly as an interaction between members of a group. Leaders are defined as agents of change and as persons whose acts affect other people more than other people's acts affect them. For Bass and Bass (2008), leadership occurs when one group member modifies the motivation or competencies of others in the group.

With the emergence of groundbreaking approaches to make leadership more effective, social scientists are working to explain and improve upon the effectiveness of leadership training modules that seek to revolutionize leadership techniques (Bennis, 2009; Conger, 1992; Durbin, 2006; George, 2007; Greenleaf et al., 2002; Krile et al., 2006; Northouse, 2006; Schein, 2004; Sashkin and Sashkin, 2003; Spillane et al., 2004; and Wheatley, 2006).

Several approaches to leadership include: servant leaders, who seek to serve the group; participatory, democratic, and collaborative leaders, who seek to share power; and transformational leaders, who seek to motivate others to do more than they thought possible.

According to Bass and Avolio (1994), transformational leaders do more with colleagues and followers than set up simple exchanges or agreements. Instead, they employ four principles, called the four I's:

Idealized influence – Transformational leaders act as role models for their followers. The leaders are admired, respected and trusted.

Inspirational motivation – Transformational leaders motivate and inspire those around them by providing meaning and challenge to their followers' work. Team spirit is aroused. Enthusiasm and optimism are displayed.

Intellectual stimulation – Transformational leaders stimulate their followers' efforts to be innovative and creative by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching old situations in new ways. Creativity is encouraged.

Individualized consideration – Transformational leaders pay special attention to each individual's needs for achievement and growth by acting as coach or mentor. Followers and colleagues are developed to successively higher levels of potential.

More than a few leaders, both in the private and community sectors, have been trained using the principles stated above.

Selecting the Respondents

The study respondents for the interviews were identified with the assistance of the following organizations and programs: Pennsylvania Futures (a regional organization located in Northwestern Pennsylvania that addresses intergovernmental cooperation), Pennsylvania State Cooperative Extension, the Pennsylvania Rural Leadership Program's Rural Leaders Directory, Penn-

sylvania Farm Bureau, Pennsylvania Environmental Council, and several private individuals. These individuals and organizations were asked to recommend rural leaders and alumni from their leadership programs. Several people on the list of possible respondents were also selected using the principal investigator’s long-standing work with rural leaders from throughout the U.S.

The researchers identified 53 possible respondents. To get a diverse sample of respondents, the researchers looked at a wide range of variables including geography, race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, emerging and veteran leaders, those who make a living as a leader, and those who volunteer, as well as diversity in the

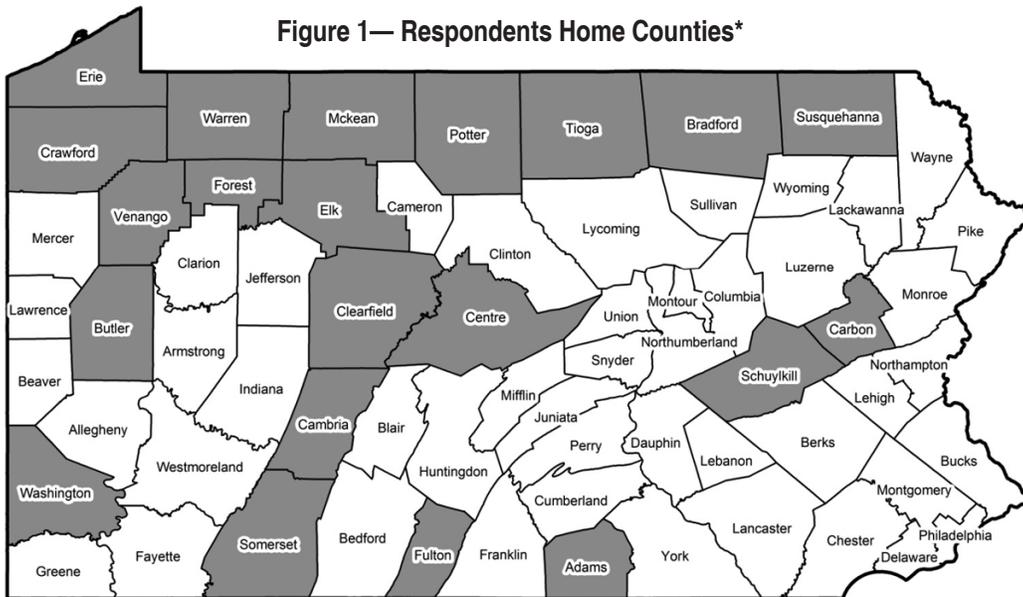
kinds of rural issues leaders are trying to address. The list included leaders from across rural Pennsylvania in fields such as farming, forestry, labor, large and small business, education, conservation, tourism, and government.

The final sample included 17 individuals and two married couples whose responses were used to produce 19 case studies.

In addition, six respondents participated in a focus group.

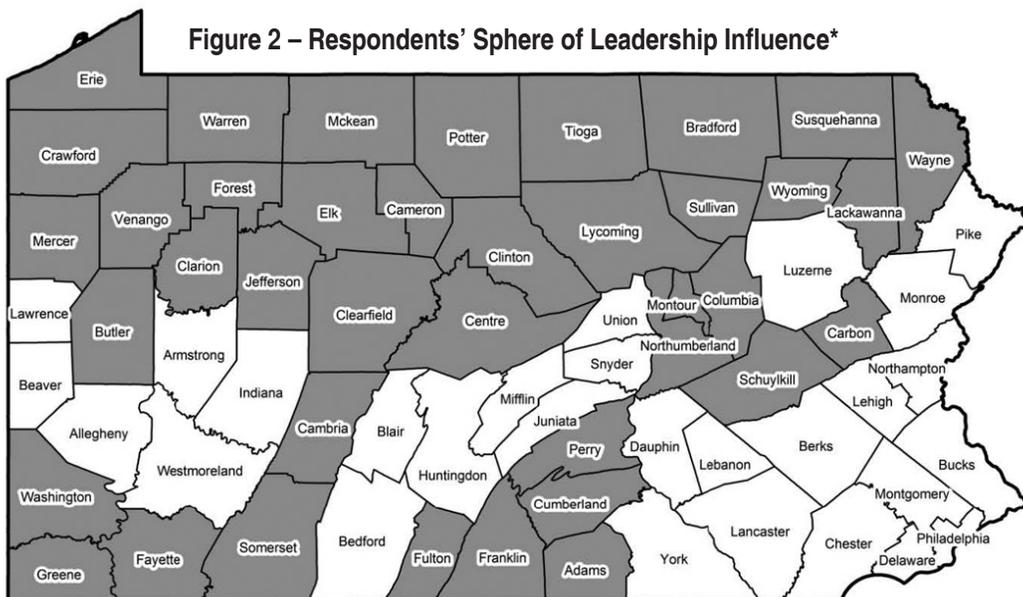
Figures 1 shows the home counties of the case study and focus group participants. Figure 2 illustrates the likely reach and influence of the case study and focus group participants in their leadership roles.

Figure 1— Respondents Home Counties*



**Home counties of the respondents are in gray.*

Figure 2 – Respondents’ Sphere of Leadership Influence*



**Counties in gray represent the study participants’ geographic areas of interest and impact.*

Interviews, case studies

The interviews/case studies focused on the respondents' experiences and leadership development. The interviews focused on the respondents' backgrounds and careers, formal and informal education and leadership training, leadership skills, techniques and skill sets, social change strategies, advice for future leaders, thoughts on the necessary personal attributes for effective leadership, and considerations in regard to leadership education and training programs.

The researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with the respondents that lasted an average of 4 hours. The researchers also spent time with several respondents in their communities as they went about some of their activities as leaders.

Focus group

The focus group included six rural community leaders and was structured along basic focus group protocols outlined in Krueger (1994). The group members were asked to answer a number of questions, including the following: What is leadership? What are the key qualities, characteristics, or attributes of an effective rural leader? What advice would you give to emerging rural leaders? If you could offer advice to those who fund rural leadership development, what would it be? and What advice would you give to someone developing and/or facilitating a rural leadership development program?

The researchers also asked the participants to evaluate the county leadership program in which they were participating by asking questions specific to the workings of the program.

Results

Following are the combined results from the case study interviews and the focus group. The results were analyzed across cases and respondents to identify patterns, similarities, and differences in responses. These areas of interest included: the qualities, characteristics, and tangible skill sets of effective leadership; experience, education and leadership development; ideas for developing future rural leaders that can effectively address problems in their communities; and advice for emerging rural leaders.

Qualities of An Effective Leader

Vision

For the respondents in this study, leadership is about inspiring others to rally behind a common vision or reach an ultimate goal. It is the ability to see the big picture while not losing sight of the process along the way.

Effective leadership is found in drawing out the strong qualities and abilities from others and enhancing the potential of individual members that helps to lead a collection of people toward their end goal. It is in building solid

teams, facilitating effective teamwork across individuals, and helping people use their strengths while continuing to modify, assist, and improve the team members in their weaker areas.

The centerpiece is that leadership is about service to others and the mission of the group, and not to the mission of the leader.

Passion/temperance

Every respondent mentioned passion as a key attribute of an effective leader. Leaders must have passion for what they are doing, for the people they are serving, and for the cause or goal for which they are working.

However, leaders must also have temperance. Leaders must be willing to listen to others and modify those views when necessary.

Leaders must also have humility. Good leaders must never think they are "better" than others. Leader may have some stronger skills, abilities, or aptitudes, but that does not make them better human beings.

They need to be honest with themselves and with others. Good leaders know their own strengths and also clearly understand their own weaknesses. They demonstrate a willingness to continually learn and a willingness to continue to grow and evolve for both themselves and others. They should not want people, groups, or communities to remain static.

Trustworthiness

Trust and trustworthiness were also common themes identified by the rural leaders interviewed in this study. In addition to passion, many respondents suggested that trustworthiness is the next most important quality a leader must have. People have to trust that a leader is working in their best interests, is accountable to the group, will take responsibility for his/her actions and will not blame others when things go awry, and will give credit where credit is due.

Leadership is about growth, personal responsibility, and accountability.

Process-oriented/action-oriented outlook

Effective leaders have to be process- and action-oriented. As many in this study have suggested, leaders should have excellent facilitation skills. They should demonstrate a desire and an excellence in facilitating processes and people to reach a common end.

Effective leaders make everyone feel as though they are a valuable part of the process. They find ways to let people work to their strengths and improve on their weaknesses, all while working toward the common group goal.

Good rural leaders see the strengths and weaknesses in the people with whom they work. They are honest with them about those qualities and give people opportunities to shine and grow, while at the same time attempting to

keep failures to a minimum and successes at a maximum for individuals and for the group.

Leaders also should be able to develop and facilitate a process that moves people toward their goal. To do that effectively, good leaders can't be scattered, they have to have some process or strategy that helps them to stay organized and action-oriented.

They also have to have an understanding of the costs and consequences of the actions they take or of those taken by the group. A leader needs to be wary of unintended consequences.

Effective leaders also have the ability to be fluid, to change to meet new circumstances or situations, and not remain rigid and inflexible.

Strong leaders must also emphasize action: the ability to move forward toward the ultimate goal.

Strong interpersonal skills

Successful leaders have positive personalities and strong interpersonal skills. They have a positive outlook and see the world in terms of challenges to be overcome, not obstacles that block their way. Effective leaders are able to clearly communicate their vision, and generate and facilitate a process that helps that vision come to life. In reaching toward that vision, good leaders are able to make decisions and delegate, and to make sure that when tasks or responsibilities are delegated, they are completed in a satisfactory way.

Leaders also must have the ability to relate to a wide range of people and personality types. They need to be able to understand and relate to almost anyone. Effective leaders possess problem-solving skills. They are able to successfully deal with conflict and possess a range of strategies to resolve conflicts. While they have the ability to speak well, they should also be keen listeners.

Service/servant leadership outlook

The majority of leaders who participated in this study has embraced the notion of service to and with others as one of the best ways to understand leadership. They see being a leader as being a servant. Several participants said: "To be an effective leader, you have to have a civil servant mentality. You have to want to do your work because you want something better for others, not just for yourself."

Some leaders in this study came to these ways of thinking by reading works on servant leadership, while others shared these same notions based on their own experiences.

How these leaders came to their conclusions about leadership is not important: what is important is that almost all of the rural leaders saw leadership as a shared process to be engaged in by passionate, honest, trustworthy, visionary people, whose hearts, minds, and hands are all directed toward making life in rural communities better, stronger, and more vibrant.

Rural Leadership Development

All of the study participants have engaged in a range of formal educational activities in school-based settings and less formal educational activities through extension services and professional organizations to develop their skills as leaders.

Formal and informal education

Formal education is an important foundation for leaders and leadership development. Of the participants in the research, 22 out of 29 had some college experience, more than half graduated from college, and a number pursued advanced degrees. Even those who never attended college said that to do so would be an important part of any leader's transformation into an effective leadership role.

Informal, or less formal (ungraded), educational experiences, workshops and training were also seen as important. Many professional organizations and associations, Cooperative Extension, and universities offer educational experiences to help leaders develop their skills.

One respondent spoke of changing his management and leadership philosophy from consultative to more participatory based on what he learned in an informal setting, and another described the changes to his work in similar terms as he was challenged by other students in his class to be more inclusive and participatory in the work he was doing in his community.

However, these same respondents also described a range of experiences that had impacted them, improved their practice, and changed their perspectives; experiences they had while working in communities and engaging with others to reach a goal.

Most professional educators believe in the power of formal education to change lives. And those who develop and promote leadership education in more informal settings across the state are just as passionate about the impacts of their work.

The results of this study would suggest that both formal and informal education are absolutely necessary in the development of rural leaders. This is so, mostly, in that the experiential learning people have done would not be nearly as powerful without these kinds of formal and informal educational opportunities.

Experience

Overwhelmingly, each respondent suggested that experience was the best teacher. All cited experience after experience that held value, insight, or an important lesson for them.

Based on participant insights, it seems that formal educational settings and coursework encouraged the participants to learn more about leadership techniques and helped them develop the strategies and techniques that would help them to continue learning. It helped teach

them they had much to learn and also flamed the passion in them to want to know more.

Formal education likely helped them find their intellectual strengths and weaknesses. It also helped them realize their ability to learn, and maybe even to teach. However, it was through experience that most of these leaders garnered the greatest education.

Connecting experience and formal/informal education

One of the conclusions of the case study interviews and focus group concerns the importance of different kinds of learning opportunities for leaders in Pennsylvania. For the most part, leaders in this study would suggest that there are myriad opportunities in which to participate and learn. However, finding the time and the financial and social support to take advantage of the programs are sometimes a struggle.

Another important part of leadership education opportunities is the networking that occurs among participants. Through networking, leaders find allies and mentors and form alliances, which are necessary elements for leaders to grow and develop.

Through formal and informal education and everyday experiences, rural leaders gain valuable insights and skills to do good work in rural communities. Therefore, it is essential to continue and grow these opportunities for both emerging and veteran leaders.

Ideas on Developing Future Rural Leaders

Entrepreneurial education

Notions about how to more effectively develop future rural leaders proved to be one of the more vexing areas of inquiry for the study respondents. One of the solutions mentioned was to provide more educational opportunities inside rural school systems for “entrepreneurial education.”

Several respondents stated that while there are some non-school-related programs directed at youth, like those through Junior Achievement, those opportunities are not broadly provided. Also, they tend to be selective, often choosing the “best and the brightest,” and possibly those most likely to leave rural areas.

Instead, many respondents said these kinds of educational programs should be made more available, or more inclusive of those students who are likely to stay in their rural communities or the surrounding areas. The respondents want more invested in the young people that will live, work, and raise their families in and around the communities in which they are born and raised.

Leadership education for local elected officials

The respondents also noted the need to develop more leadership education for local elected officials. Many respondents said that, while they were able to learn the skills and tasks specific to their position, such as budget-

ing, they were less adept at resolving conflicts, facilitating meetings, and engaging more people in government.

Expanding networks

Several respondents noted the need for more networking opportunities for emerging and veteran leaders to learn about “best practices.” For example, one respondent, a former rural school superintendent, described how he encouraged teachers from his district to visit and learn from teachers in other districts that were demonstrating success in some aspect of education. He noted the impact it had on teachers, support staff, and the school board, and how a similar strategy could benefit other organizations, such as local governments.

Developing leadership capacity

Other ideas cited by the respondents included working to develop leadership capacity among seniors and retired residents in rural communities. Intergenerational learning opportunities among both younger and older leaders and community members could help develop and expand leadership potential.

Go out and do it. . .

The respondents said the best advice for emerging leaders was to just do it. Most respondents felt that the only way to develop leadership skills was to get involved with organizations that need leaders.

They also stressed the importance of mentors, who are instrumental in helping emerging leaders develop their skills, and continuing education, which could include classes, workshops, clinics or other training.

Improve strengths, overcome weaknesses

Emerging leaders should also begin to understand their own strengths and weaknesses and undertake any and all kinds of experiential, informal, or formal education to improve their strengths and overcome their weaknesses.

Develop a leadership philosophy

Emerging leaders need to develop their own leadership philosophy and leadership style. Leaders need to develop the confidence and ability to speak in front of groups and must also be able to engage a wide range of individuals and personality types in conversation. They need to be able to ask good questions and listen and hear the answers they receive. Another key idea, especially in the early evolution of leadership, is to embrace the ideas of personal accountability and responsibility. An emerging leader is likely, especially in the early stages of the rise to leadership, to make some mistakes and poor decisions. A strong leader should take responsibility for them and be accountable. Doing so will engender strong, trusting relationships between the leader and the group.

Develop support network

A leader also must develop a strong support network that encompasses more than an “inner circle.” The group needs to see that the leader values all members and not just a select few. Developing strong relationships and support among members only strengthens the group and its work.

Other key pieces of advice from the respondents are to know the issues your group is addressing, the group’s organizational structure, and the “players” involved in assessing, addressing, and finding solutions to the problem being addressed. For example, it may require a deeper understanding of the functions of the political, economic, regulatory, or social systems within a town, municipality, county, state, or even the nation.

Conclusions and Considerations

The study participants said effective rural leaders must have interpersonal and social skills as well as technical and management skills.

The participants also noted that rural leaders should have the ability to educate and help others develop their skills, and yet retain the ability to continually learn.

The respondents strongly indicated that successful rural leaders must be concerned about effective and authentic processes to make decisions, shape visions, and develop communities, and must be results-oriented to make things happen.

Leaders here must be passionate about their work but they must also have temperance and self-control. Again, the respondents advocated the idea of balance.

Leaders are expected to have vision and to be trustworthy. They have to ask people to believe in, see, and work toward a vision that is yet to be.

The respondents indicated that authentic rural leaders need to be strong and able individuals, but also need to use that strength in service to others and not themselves.

Suggestions for Improving Rural Leadership Development

Incorporate entrepreneurial education at multiple levels

Almost half of the respondents suggested the need for more entrepreneurial education in grades K-12, so that students may grow their creative and entrepreneurial skills. Some suggested that while Junior Achievement is a good start, more youth need to be engaged in leadership programs, especially those who are likely to stay in rural communities and rural regions.

Others advocated for more concentrated entrepreneurial education across a range of subject areas both inside the formal educational structure and among community organizations.

Identify next generation of rural leaders

All of the participants agreed there is a desperate need for a new generation of leaders. There was great concern about the transition of current leaders to future leaders, especially among those who work in public service. Their concerns include the replacement of the actual people and leadership development opportunities for these new leaders.

Others suggested there were not enough purposeful and willful mentoring opportunities being created so that young employees or students could begin to experience the realities of public service and develop the necessary skills, aptitudes and perspectives. All respondents strongly believed in the continued investment in rural leadership development education and training programs to train future leaders.

Continue offering leadership education for elected officials

Every respondent strongly supported the continuation of educational opportunities for existing elected leaders. The respondents said that elected officials need to continue to evolve and develop leadership skills: some more practical, like effective meeting facilitation and conflict resolution skills, and others more personal, like effective listening and speaking skills.

Expand recruitment strategies for rural leadership development programs

The respondents suggested that program recruitment for any rural leadership development program needs to be expanded. A strong critique of leadership education programs across the state was the self-nomination process. The respondents indicated that self-nomination is a good start for enrollment, but it is not enough. There must be a further vetting of applicants and more specific recruitment goals, objectives, and processes for the varying leadership development programs across the state.

Every respondent said they would like to see more vetting of participants in the state-funded leadership development programs at the local, regional and state levels. They believe it is up to the program staff to make sure that participation in the programs is driven by authentic desire and need. Participation cannot be just a resume builder, or a way to improve one’s network, or focused on personal aspirations; although it does have some elements of each of these.

It means that program staff must, of course, make sure that participants possess the requisite foundational skills, knowledge, and perspective to benefit from program participation, but important too, is that staff makes sure that participants are earnest in their willingness to develop and implement what they are learning in their communities.

Follow-up after program completion

Most of the respondents wanted policy-makers and leadership program staff to understand that there is a greater need for accountability and further follow-up after participants “graduate” from leadership programs. Many respondents were disappointed in the follow-up offered by most leadership programs, state-supported and otherwise.

All agreed that program evaluation, program development, and program improvement are essential functions that must be funded and taken seriously as part of the overall program.

Introduce circuit riders to enrich leadership programs

A number of respondents suggested the use of circuit riders to develop and enrich leadership programs in rural communities. Circuit riders, with expertise in certain subjects or issues, could also add value to leadership training and education programs.

Create regional networks to enhance rural leadership development

All of the suggestions offered by the study respondents were intertwined and offered insights into a more “regional” approach to leadership development.

In recent years, Pennsylvania has been putting a great deal of effort and political, social, and economic capital in trying to develop and enhance this regional perspective to leadership development. However, according to the respondents, the commonwealth has not yet provided enough incentives for stakeholders to really move things forward in a more region-centered way, nor has it provided the necessary “regional-level” leadership development programming.

The researchers offer that the missing link in growing a more regional approach and perspective to community development in rural Pennsylvania may be more realistic financial incentives as well as the willingness and support to help establish a “regional level rural leadership development education plan.” They offered that the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education universities, Penn State Cooperative Extension, or a combination of both, may be vehicles for this proposed strategy. This strategy would not only bring a more region-centered forum for leaders, residents, and others, but also more regional cooperation, and sharing of social, cultural, academic, and economic resources across some of these state institutions as well.

Funding priorities and programs

Every respondent noted the need for state leaders and decision-makers to support more funding for individuals to participate in local, regional, and statewide leadership programs. The respondents said the state seems to be doing a reasonably good job of providing funding and resources for the educational programming itself; however, they believe there must be support for the individual participants as well. Tuition-charging programs limit the opportunities for emerging and other rural leaders as most do not have sufficient funds for scholarships to the program.

The study respondents said these kinds of expenditures are solid long-term investments that will pay dividends to rural communities in the commonwealth over many years. The study respondents want the state legislature to continue to invest in rural leadership programs that already exist, such as RULE, as well as those developed by state extension offices.

They agreed that other educational opportunities in which to continue investing were those for elected and appointed leaders, like local government officials and school board members.

The respondents also emphasized the need to invest in and grow a new generation of leaders. All of the respondents agreed that stable and increased funding for rural leadership development across the commonwealth is necessary to continue to attract and grow leaders in rural Pennsylvania.

All agreed that continuing to fund existing statewide and extension-based programs to support existing and future rural leaders will help to ensure the social, cultural, political, and economic development of all rural Pennsylvania communities.

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