

Partnering with Rural Populations to Build Community through Leadership Development

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Abstract

The Initiative for the Future of Rural Oklahoma was implemented as a pilot program in thirteen sites in Oklahoma to support rural communities that faced challenges on several fronts. The initiative emphasized engagement through local partnerships between a land-grant university and concerned community citizens. Additionally, the initiative provided programming to build community, for the first time at that university linking two content areas: leadership development and economic development. This article addresses the identification of the need for the program, as well as the development of the initiative and its various characteristics, including the leadership development component. Developing a leadership legacy will require some time; however, indicators suggest that the initiative has stimulated positive change and action.

Introduction

Rural communities face challenges on several fronts. These challenges often include declining population, competition with more populated areas for economic development, and inadequate infrastructure and community services to support economic development and population growth (*Barta, Trzebiatowski, and Woods 2003*).

The short supply of community leaders prepared to meet those challenges has also been noted. The National Association of Counties surveyed five thousand county officials concerning training and education needs, and respondents ranked "leadership development techniques" in one of the top positions (*Kampinsky 1998*). Also, a recent report recommended that the extension system needed to support "shared leadership and proactive decision making" (*Extension Committee on Organization and Policy 2002, 6*).

Assessments completed in Oklahoma underscored the national recommendations for leadership development. One group identified the need to provide opportunities "at the local

level to develop community leaders and assist with community improvement” (*Advisory System Task Force 2001, 11*). The report also recommended action “through building bridges, networks, and partnerships to address critical issues” that confront Oklahoma’s communities, counties, and organizations. In 2002, the Oklahoma State Legislature passed resolutions urging the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service (OCES) to undertake the task of identifying the critical needs of communities. The OCES conducted community listening sessions in all seventy-seven counties. Facilitators posed the following guiding question at each session:

Considering the next three to five years, what are the critical issues in your community and in Oklahoma that need to be addressed to realize a positive future for you, your family, and your community?

A total of 2,722 adults and older youth participated in 78 community listening sessions conducted in 2002. When session facilitators reported the major issues identified in each session,

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four categories of concerns became apparent: community and economic development, family and home, schools and education, and infrastructure and community services. Recurring topics in community development included community cooperation, citizen involvement, and leadership development (*Burton and Woods 2003*). These two assessments documented the recognition that building community and economic development begins with building leadership capacity.

Engagement through university and community partnerships:

There has been a compelling call for engagement. The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (1999) described a two-way concept of engagement going beyond the traditional one-way process often inherent in extension, outreach, and public service in which the university transferred its expertise to its constituents. The report noted that full engagement

reflected a commitment to sharing and reciprocity, and envisioned engagement as partnerships—"two-way streets defined by mutual respect among the partners for what each brings to the table" (*Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities 1999*, 9). In another report, it was noted that full engagement "implies an expectation that all partners have the fiscal, human or intellectual resources" to bring to bear on an issue or need (*Extension Committee on Organization and Policy 2002*, 4).

The *public-learning or viewpoint-learning model* expanded on the concept of going beyond the traditional one-way learning process. In his work on public learning, Yankelovich (2001) observed that the traditional one-way learning model focused on creating awareness and information and worked only when there are no hard choices to make. He noted, however, that the public learning model worked through three stages to get to resolution, with the public's wisdom adding value to the experts' wisdom. He added that a key element was interactivity—people learning from one another—and challenged society to develop institutions for the three-stage model.

"County extension programs embraced the local partnerships concept."

The formation and sustantation of university-community partnerships has been studied. Working with community partnerships to support extension impact programs gave evidence to the value of the following elements: determining capacity to partner, recruitment strategies, convening and communication strategies, and maintaining the momentum (*Daugherty and Williams 2000*). In their work with a statewide partnership, Williams and Daugherty (2003) noted the importance of a shared conceptual link and its contribution to the recruitment of partners outside the land-grant university and their desire to commit to working with the university on a long-term effort.

Previous OCES programming in leadership development and economic development: For several years, the OCES offered separate extension programs in community leadership development and economic development. The faculty members were located in different academic departments and colleges, and their

programs targeted somewhat different audiences. Each program met with some measure of success, but faculty and others were receptive to doing business in a different way.

Initiative for the Future of Rural Oklahoma

Inspired by the Advisory System Task Force, the OCES director convened faculty to consider an interdisciplinary approach to community development that would link leadership development and economic development in one program. The Initiative for the Future of Rural Oklahoma (Initiative) was created by a task force composed of OCES county extension educators and OCES specialists from area, district, and state offices and citizen advisory groups that provided guidance and input. A steering committee was developed to identify, adapt, and/or create materials, implement the program, conduct formative and summative evaluation, and explore long-term sustainability. A faculty member was named Initiative director.

One major facet of the Initiative was the commitment by OCES administration to make available funds through a competitive grant proposal process to support a pilot program for up to three years. Crucial proposal elements included appropriate objectives, timeline, and outcome indicators.

Initiative goals included the following:

- Enhance and develop the effectiveness of community leaders and county extension educators to identify and address critical issues confronting the community, especially those relating to leadership and community development
- Demonstrate to the community the full range of assistance available through OCES/Oklahoma State University and its partners
- Provide a long-term commitment to selected communities to aid implementation of development efforts
- Document impact of the pilot projects with thorough evaluation
- Set the stage for an ongoing program.

The goals influenced the strategies employed to recruit participants.

Two categories of participation: The steering committee recognized that communities were at different levels of readiness to engage in the intensive Initiative program. Through various leader-

ship development opportunities, some communities had a cadre of leaders who needed economic development training. Other communities lacked access to leadership development opportunities and the attendant pool of local leaders was not in place. Their interests centered on a leadership program geared to creating local leaders equipped to engage in a project. Thus, the steering committee identified two categories of participation in the Initiative:

- Initial leadership training (one year), focused on skill building through leadership development programs, with proposals not to exceed \$10,000
- Comprehensive leadership training (three years), focused on: (1) skill building through leadership development programs as needed, and (2) an identified community project related to a critical community issue including economic development, with proposals not to exceed \$100,000.

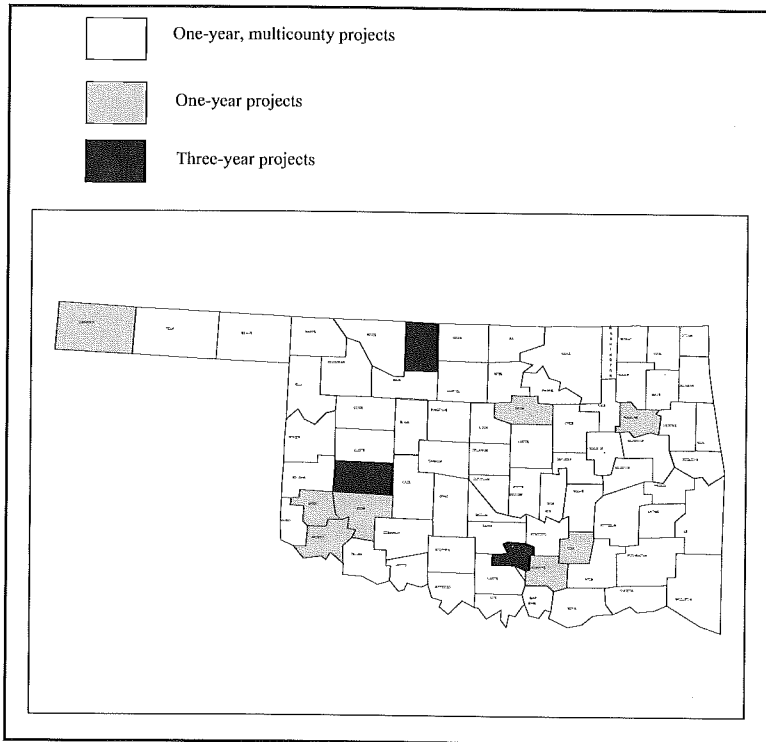
Proposals were limited to requesting a maximum of 90 percent of the needed funds from the Initiative; at least 10 percent of the amount had to come from local contributions, including in-kind.

Participant eligibility, recruitment, and selection: All county extension programs in Oklahoma were eligible. Proposals had to be developed by teams that included persons representing various segments of the community and county extension educators, who served as the project directors. The committee received proposals representing thirty-seven counties. Thirteen proposals from seventeen counties were funded: ten proposals for initial leadership training and three proposals for comprehensive leadership training (Figure 1). To reinforce the importance of the proposals' objectives, timelines, and outcomes, the Initiative director and steering committee worked with applicants to refine and improve these elements at several intervals:

- RFP workshops and postworkshop consulting
- postselection negotiations
- Initiative kick-off retreat and postretreat negotiations
- quarterly reports tied directly to each project's objectives.

Community base: An important element of the Initiative was its community base. The concepts of communities of place and communities of interest (*Extension Committee on Organization and Policy*

Figure 1: Initiative for the Future of Rural Oklahoma—Pilot Project Sites 2002-2003



2002) guided the steering committee's judgment. The committee created a working definition of community to assist teams submitting proposals to participate in the Initiative. Ultimately, the steering committee defined community very broadly—from neighborhood to multicounty.

County extension programs embraced the local partnerships concept. Prior to submitting proposals to be part of the Initiative, applicants formed local partnerships with persons representing multiple segments of their communities. Following proposal acceptance, the Initiative steering committee examined the composition of the local partnerships for the thirteen projects that were selected. Each local partnership contained at least one representative of the local county extension program, as was required by the Initiative guidelines, as well as other partners representing various parts of the community, such as business, industry, government agencies, education (for example, common education, vocational-technical career education, and higher education), non-profit

organizations, faith-based groups, and community volunteer groups.

The projects varied greatly in their interpretation of community. Some focused on one or two communities. Others focused on all incorporated towns and unincorporated areas in the county except for one or two larger towns that already had leadership programs and/or economic development efforts. Most projects directed attention to an entire county. Two projects interpreted community as three-county efforts.

“Several project leaders report that for the first time key community leaders are identifying long-range goals, opportunities, and projects that need to be accomplished locally.”

Components of the Initiative: The Initiative featured two components essential to the core of the program:

- A partnership at the local level
- Subject matter content in leadership development and economic development.

The steering committee recognized the importance of local partnerships and teams in securing engagement. The emphasis on content in two broad subject areas was an acknowledgment that they were each essential to achieving the goals of the Initiative.

Orientation Retreat and Continuing Guidance during Implementation

All Initiative project leadership teams participated in an orientation retreat conducted November 19–21, 2002. The retreat was designed to bring project leadership teams together to focus on learning more about current trends impacting Oklahoma communities and resources available to support leadership and community development efforts and on assisting teams in further developing their project plans. Project teams and resource people spent three intense days working to develop project plans that realistically addressed community development needs in light of national and state trends and capitalized on numerous resources available through the OCES and partnering organizations/groups. As a result initial project proposals were refined, more clearly defined, and further developed. Although frustrating at times, work during the

retreat made substantial progress toward refining project objectives and developing plans with potential for success, including clear objectives and success indicators. More importantly, the retreat contributed to developing a group of project leaders who were beginning to function as a team. Over the course of the next year the resources invested in the Initiative retreat proved to be well invested. The Initiative Steering Committee continued to consult individually with project team leaders to refine and improve community project plans.

Each project submitted quarterly project reports keyed to project objectives indicating project activities completed during the quarter and how these activities contributed to meeting project objectives. In addition, reports provided information on activities planned for the next quarter. The Initiative Steering Committee met and reviewed quarterly reports in an effort to help projects stay on target to meet established objectives and to assist in identifying resources to help accomplish planned activities. Written and oral feedback was provided to each project quarterly.

The Initiative's Leadership Development Component

This article addresses the leadership development component, which expanded to include citizen engagement in public decision making through public deliberative forums. Community leadership programs had proliferated in the state in recent years. Typically, an organization such as a chamber of commerce sponsored the program and conducted it through staff, organization members, and community volunteers. There were other models as well, such as community leadership programs conducted by colleges and universities, often through their Cooperative extension services or other outreach efforts. An Initiative subcommittee examined several models and curricula, including the Palmetto Leadership program of Clemson University and the manual *Developing Community Leadership: The EXCEL Approach* from the University of Missouri. Learning from those programs and building on their experience with community leadership programs in Oklahoma and the statewide Leadership Oklahoma program, the subcommittee developed a model for a one-year community leadership program and a curriculum with emphasis on experiential learning.

The one-year program model was grounded in the concept of being convened and managed locally through a local steering committee (*Initiative for the Future of Rural Oklahoma 2003*). The subcommittee developed new materials and revised existing resources to provide the thirteen Initiative projects with tools for local steering committee formation, structure, promotion, and operations, as well as local leadership program participant recruitment, selection, and orientation. The maximum recommended length of the leadership program was one year in duration, and local steering committees were encouraged to customize the length and frequency of sessions according to the culture of the community. The format called for an opening and closing retreat, each approximately six to eight hours in length. For the various sessions between retreats, the local steering committee selected from a menu of topics provided by the Initiative, or called on local resources to conduct the sessions.

The Initiative subcommittee working on the curriculum in leadership development provided a menu of topics to the local project committees, including the following categories:

- Understanding self and others (ex. True Colors personality inventory)
- Leadership (two learning modules)
- Power (one learning module)
- Conflict management and resolution (four learning modules)
- Communications (one learning module)
- Team building (one learning module)
- Working with volunteers/committees
- Effective meetings
- Business etiquette
- Managing change
- Public policy formation
- Diversity and inclusion.

In several instances, one or more learning modules were developed for a category. The modules contained two parts:

- Instructor's guide, with background, references, exercises, and handouts
- Electronic visuals with talking points.

The modules included stand-alone materials so that a local steering committee member or other volunteer could teach the session, if desired, without assistance from the campus-based faculty member.

Progress toward Building Community through Leadership

As the first year of the Initiative project neared completion, numerous preliminary indicators of success were noted. Possibly the most significant was summarized by the Initiative director (*Williams 2003*):

Rural Oklahoma Communities and counties are benefiting from The Initiative for the Future of Rural Oklahoma projects. . . . Several project leaders report that for *the first time* key community leaders are identifying long-range goals, opportunities, and projects that need to be accomplished locally. Other project leaders report that communities within their respective counties are now working together for *the first time* to improve the well-being of residents through leadership [and community] development programs.

Specifically, project quarterly reports revealed that a variety of leadership strategies and skills were developed and used to address community needs, including:

- Creation of strong, enduring multicounty/multicommunity leadership teams
- Development of mission statements for community leadership teams
- Utilization of citizen engagement approaches
- Surveys
- Deliberative Forums
- Involving youth to plan and conduct community development projects
- Creation and implementation of strategic plans
- Seeking additional resources through grantsmanship
- Learning more about other communities by conducting study tours.

Further evidence of impact included the number and variety of community development projects that were planned and

implemented. These projects were diverse, reflecting the characteristics and needs of the communities served by the Initiative:

- **Eco-tourism**—In two projects, small communities partnered to implement a strategic plan to enhance tourism. In different areas of the state, the projects focused on local natural resources and marketed the attributes of their areas.
- **Community Pride and Shop-At-Home**—Local business staff learned to represent their business and area by encouraging visitors to enjoy local sites and patronize local businesses. Shop-At-Home programs helped businesses market the economic/social advantages of shopping locally.
- **Home-based and small business assistance**—Local entrepreneurs learned about the global marketplace through business education resources and networking opportunities with similar businesses.
- **Airport improvement**—Strategic planning identified this need, leading to the establishment of a refueling station and courtesy car to support airport activities.
- **Countywide economic development teams**—Several Initiative projects learned team building and identified shared community development priorities as well as educational resources to meet these priorities, thus removing focus from traditional rivalries that had diminished potential for community development within a county or area.
- **Visual merchandising seminars**—Small retailers had little or no preparation in visual merchandising yet were competing with the “big city look.” Through Initiative seminars, they learned strategies to compete on a low-cost basis.
- **Community cleanup/beautification**—Several projects learned to organize and motivate local partners and volunteers to improve their communities’ appearance as a step in attracting new businesses and families and soliciting new community resources through grants. Projects included downtown creek cleanup, utility pole removal, pocket parks, removal of unsightly buildings, and sidewalks around the school.
- **Countywide high-speed Internet access**—One project developed and implemented a plan to achieve countywide high-speed Internet access, thus embarking on a first step to increasing community/economic development in their area.

- First-ever community-wide long-range plan—Several projects learned about the benefits of long-range planning that involves the community, and they began the first-ever long-range plans for their communities.
- Sister City program—Emerging leaders in two small communities learned leadership skills, encouraged concepts of mutual support, and developed plans for local community development projects.
- Primary care facility—Leadership development led to community planning to address health care. One Initiative site attracted a primary care facility, and another site started the process.
- Value-added manufacturing—To capitalize on local raw materials and goods, one project focused on attracting manufacturing facilities to enhance the quality and marketability of local resources.

Excerpts from project reports helped bring the summarized accomplishments for the Initiative to life (*Williams 2003*).

The group developed into a 'unit' who truly enjoyed meeting. Watching as they shared and developed ideas for their communities and the area was very gratifying. They attended every meeting expecting to learn all they could and left excited by what they had heard. The best gauge of the program's success was the group's desire to continue meeting, even though funding from *The Initiative for the Future of Rural Oklahoma* grant program may not be available [in the future]. The participants felt that the benefits they received from the program were so worthwhile that they are willing to secure their own funding in order to continue.

A positive factor is that they had their meeting in August without the Extension educators being there. They met and developed the potential guidelines for the survey. This is a plus for the committee and indicates the group is taking ownership of the project.

The Greer County PRIDE Program, which offered two hours of customer service training to front line employees, followed by a three-hour county familiarization tour, was a great success. The program was aired on SUNUP both on OETA and on RFD-TV. Community members

have continuously asked if we planned to offer this program in the future.

The Tishomingo Development Team is making a definite impact on the community. The team members have actively participated in leadership and economic development seminars across the state. Study tours of other communities have given the team information about resources for grant and loan funding and inspiration for community improvement projects. . . . The team is recognized in the area as a leader in community development, but the best tribute to our program is in the fact that press releases for Development Team events are now printed on the front page of the county newspaper.

The Kiowa County Leadership Program has created a unique situation in Kiowa County. It is allowing communities to work together toward common goals. The efforts already have paid big dividends by spurring legislation to allow communities to burn abandoned structures in the name of fire training for county firefighters, as well as securing high speed Internet access for the entire county.

History has been made! For the first time, key community leaders have come together to develop a long-range plan for Murray County. This devoted team, co-chaired by two community bankers, has met faithfully each week to plan and develop goals for the future. The plan is nearly complete and will be unveiled in October at a special reception for the entire county.

Perkins and Yale have 31 trained leaders who are currently or becoming involved in these communities. The leaders are trained in planning and conducting community projects. . . . The sister cities are sharing experiences and efforts to help each other in achieving results and strengthening bonds.

The Pushmataha County [Youth Leadership] team did meet in June to decide on the community service projects that they wanted to complete. They have set the wheels in motion to begin actual "hands-on" work.

In other news, *The Initiative* project plans to purchase additional leadership curriculum to enhance leadership training in the community. This also would provide those committed to the health center another opportunity to improve their leadership skills.

The Washita County Entrepreneurial and Leadership Program has created a positive image for Washita County. The program has encouraged communities to work together to concentrate on common goals that benefit the entire county.

Summary and Preliminary Assessment

Developing a leadership legacy that results in long-term community change and development does not occur quickly. However, preliminary indicators suggest that the Initiative for the Future of Rural Oklahoma has stimulated very positive change in seventeen counties across the state. Initiative objectives to enhance and develop the effectiveness of community leaders and

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extension educators in identifying and addressing critical leadership and community development issues that confront the community while demonstrating resources available through OCES and other partners are being met. Long-term commitment to the spirit of the Initiative project is evident at state, district, and

local levels. Current severe budget restrictions have not lessened the commitment to rural leadership and community development but rather have enhanced the commitment of those involved at all levels. Given budget constraints, the quantity of fiscal resources is diminished, but commitment to the principles of leadership and community development continues to be very strong.

Counties that have not been part of the Initiative pilot project are very interested in the successes demonstrated by the Initiative and are eager to use the variety of resources that have supported the Initiative projects. A team of district, state, and county OCES professionals have developed an in-service education course, Healthy Communities 101, to share leadership and community development resources. The primary objective of this day-long in-service is to highlight tools used to support the Initiative to help EXTENSION EDUCATORS and their community partners respond to local needs as indicated during the Oklahoma community listening

sessions. Over seventy-five extension educators and community partners have attended one of four in-service education sessions conducted in various locations across the state. Each participant will receive a compact disk designed to highlight leadership and community development resources available to assist communities in these challenging times.

Impact assessment of the Initiative continues with more refined assessment of success indicators forthcoming. However, in the short term, it is concluded that

“[B]udget restrictions have not lessened the commitment to rural leadership and community development but rather have enhanced the commitment of those involved at all levels.”

the Initiative for the Future of Rural Oklahoma has successfully assisted 17 counties in developing community leaders who are capable and willing to tackle challenging community development issues. Further, communities not directly involved in the Initiative project will benefit from resources developed and learning that is resulting from this pilot project. The Initiative is demonstrating the tenets of engagement in a contemporary social and economic setting that particularly challenges rural communities.

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