

# Impacts of an Agricultural Leadership Extension Program for County Officials

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## Abstract

*Agricultural leadership extension programs aim to expand the horizons of leaders through study and experiences. These programs can have direct implications for communities when they are designed and delivered for county officials. This study specifically examined a leadership program administered in Texas which has graduated five classes of county commissioners and judges over the past decade, boasting 54 alumni. Given that the program had not been evaluated, this study used qualitative methodology to determine the program's impacts on community leaders. Eleven program graduates were interviewed as well as asked to provide artifacts representing impacts of the program. Categories emerged from the data and were identified as: affective impacts, behavioral impacts, and cognitive impacts. Data revealed that the social networks and relationships participants gained was an overarching outcome of the program as these influenced the affective, behavioral, and cognitive impacts of the program. Several recommendations for further research, program modifications, and community leadership opportunities resulted from the study. Findings provide insight for those seeking to improve programming for agricultural leadership extension programs.*

**Keywords:** Leadership; Extension; Program; Community; Evaluation; Impacts

## Introduction

The goal of leadership development programs is to build leadership capacity as a measure against unforeseen challenges or developments (Kaufman, Rateau, Ellis, & Kasperbauer, 2010). Agricultural leadership development programs have the potential to initiate change and increase human capital and network resources within rural communities (Etuk, Rahe, Crandall, Sektnan, & Bowman, 2013). Agricultural leadership development programs aim to expand the horizons of participants through study and experiences (Carter & Rudd, 2000). Participants of these programs are exposed to a wide range of state and national issues that are not commodity or sector-specific. Additionally, these programs give participants an overview of other related issues such as the environment, interpersonal relationships, the political system, and urban interface. While some agricultural leadership development programs are privately funded, others are mandated through state Extension organizations. According to Diem and Nikola (2005), a variety of Extension educational programs have been offered over the last 20 years with the purpose of developing agricultural and community leaders. The evaluation of agricultural leadership development programs has been of research interest to program staff and funding sources for such programs

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(Black & Earnest, 2009; Carter & Rudd, 2000; Diem & Nikola, 2005; Russon & Reinelt, 2004; Van De Valk, 2011). However, there is a lack of research and literature related to the impacts of agricultural leadership development programs specific to community leadership (Etuk et al., 2013).

According to Hartley and Allison (2000), the movement to incorporate leadership development in local government has emerged as a way to modernize and improve public services. The government's agenda for modernization contends for an improved role for "local authorities in leading their communities and being responsible for the social, economic and environmental well-being of the locality" (Hartley & Allison, 2000, p. 35). The Cooperative Extension Service (CES) has historically served communities by offering leadership programming to develop leaders for the contexts of public services and agricultural and natural resources (Carter & Rudd, 2000). CES organizations have the "ability to deliver needed education to producers who need it" (Sparks, 2014, para. 5), making them ideal host organizations for agricultural leadership development programs.

The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service created the V.G. Young Institute of County Government in 1969 to provide educational programs for Texas county officials (Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, n.d.). In 2005, the Institute developed a two-year agricultural leadership development program known as the Commissioners Court Leadership Academy (CCLA) to further enhance the professionalism, broaden the knowledge, and enrich the experience of county judges and commissioners in Texas. To participate in the CCLA program, interested county judges and commissioners must first apply (Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, n.d.). Applications are then reviewed and evaluated based on the applicant's achievements, skills, leadership roles, education and training, personal and professional goals, and participation in professional associations. The program accepts up to 24 participants per two-year class. Throughout the two-year program period, participants commit to 16 days of educational sessions and travel time. Selected participants attend three three-day sessions, each occurring at locations throughout the state, and one seven-day session in Washington, D.C. The CCLA program provides leadership education and development for Texas county commissioners and judges. The CCLA program has graduated five classes of participants and boasts 54 alumni. However, there had not been a formal evaluation of the program itself or the impacts of the program on graduates. As an agricultural leadership development program provided by Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, the CCLA program has implications for changes in county governments and communities across the state of Texas. Moreover, there is a gap in the literature concerning the evaluation of agricultural leadership programs addressing specific contexts such as local government.

The purpose of this study was to identify the impacts and outcomes of the CCLA program on its graduates. The research question was as follows: What are the impacts and outcomes of the CCLA program? This study was substantiated by Research Priority Six of the American Association for Agricultural Education National Research Agenda (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016). This research priority articulates the role that vibrant and resilient communities play in the success of students and academic endeavors. The development of vibrant and resilient communities requires that local citizens be provided with opportunities to develop leadership skills and apply them through implementing real change in their communities. Just as education is "critical to a resilient community to increase knowledge, improve practices, and influence behaviors," (Roberts et al., 2016, p. 51) the education provided by the CCLA program can help to build resiliency within communities through the understood impacts and outcomes of the program.

### **Literature Review**

The need for evaluation of CES programs was substantiated by the passing of the Government Performance Results Act (GPRA) in 1993 and the Agricultural Research, Extension, and Education Reform Act (AREERA) in 1998 (Lamm, Carter, & Lamm, 2016). The ability to

accurately evaluate and articulate the outcomes of CES programs is critical to the continuation of support for such programs. Unfortunately, comprehensive evaluations of leadership development programs can be challenging to conduct (Black & Earnest, 2009).

Lamm, Carter, and Lamm (2016) reported the results of an evaluation of eight agricultural leadership development programs administered by CES within the southern region of the United States. Survey questionnaire methods were used to collect data from 960 completed questionnaires, offering an overall response rate of 54%. Demographics of the participants were determined from the collected survey data; the average participant was male (74%), white (92%), and in their late thirties at graduation ( $M = 38.61$ ,  $SD = 8.37$ ). Using Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory and Kirkpatrick's (1994) four-level evaluation model for training programs as a framework for the evaluation, it was found that participants were very satisfied with their program experience and thus, the learning environment met their needs. It was also found that program participants have held a large number of leadership roles within their communities and industries, with a total of 2,778 leadership roles reported and 46% of the participants serving in leadership positions upon completion of their program experience.

Many leadership development programs assert that participants' personal and professional networks are enhanced as a result of their participation (Van De Valk & Constan, 2011). Social capital is defined as "features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). However, sufficient research is not available to support a causal relationship between leadership development programs and social capital (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002; Van De Valk & Constan, 2011). Van De Valk (2008) noted that while networking is often cited as a benefit of participating in leadership development programs and is an important step in enhancing social capital, research is still needed to better understand the dynamic relationship between social capital and leadership. According to Gopee (2002), social capital is important in learning because it is the main process by which adults learn in the context of organizations. Terroin (2006) found social capital to be beneficial to program success in several ways. The participants' social networks formed as a result of the program helped to ensure their continuous, informal learning through ongoing interaction with their peers. Social capital as a result of programming was also found to enhance participants' sense of belonging and bonding.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study was based on Merriam and Caffarella's (1999) five orientations to learning: behaviorism, cognitive orientation, humanist orientation, social learning, and constructivism. Each of these orientations are described for the purpose of establishing a foundation for the study's conceptual framework. Because this study was focused on the reported impacts and outcomes of a leadership development program, the researchers were interested in what the participants said they learned from the program and how they learned what they learned.

The behaviorist orientation of learning assumes the following: learning is observable through changes in behavior; the learned behavior is determined and shaped by the environment and its elements and not by the individual learner; and the principles of contiguity, or how close in time two events must be to be connected, and reinforcement, or any means of increasing the odds of an event to happen again, are crucial to explaining the learning process. The behaviorist learning process is manifested through behavioral objectives, competency-based education, and skill development and training (Grippin & Peters, 1984).

The cognitive process includes insight, information processing, memory, and perception (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). From this perspective, education is designed to develop one's

capacity and skills to learn better, and the educator is responsible for structuring the content to be learned. Cognitivism is manifested in adult learning through cognitive development, learning how to learn, and intelligence, learning, and memory as a function of age.

Merriam and Caffarella (1999) describe social learning theory as combining elements of behaviorism and cognitivist orientations. Bandura's (1986) work on social learning theory accounts for both the learner and the environment as interacting parts to learning; behavior is influenced by the environment, which is influenced by people. The learning process is a result of the interaction with and observation of others in a social context (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Social learning is manifested in adult learning through socialization, social roles, and mentoring.

Humanist theorists (i.e., Rogers (1983) and Maslow (1970)) assert that people control their own destiny, are inherently good and seek to make the world better, are free to act and behave as they choose, and possess unlimited potential for growth and development. The humanist orientation to learning sees the process of learning as a personal act to fulfill one's potential. Both affective and cognitive needs drive this process as the learner seeks to become self-actualized and autonomous. The humanist approach is manifested in adult learning through andragogy and self-directed learning.

The constructivist maintains the belief that "learning is a process of constructing meaning; it is how people make sense of their experience" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 261). The constructed meaning is made by the learner and is dependent on the learner's past and present knowledge structure. Learning is therefore a result of the learner's internal construction of reality. Constructivism can be manifested in adult learning in the form of experiential learning, self-directed learning, perspective transformation, and reflective practice.

Beyond the five orientations to learning described by Merriam and Cafferella (1999) are other learning theories that offer understanding for how individuals are motivated to learn. Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs provides a pyramid model for motivation factors that can apply to learning. According to Maslow (1970), individuals are motivated by unmet needs from the lowest level of the pyramid model. From a learning perspective, this looks like an individual who is unmotivated to learn based on what needs are not being met. For example, if the individual has his or her physiological and safety needs met but lacks a sense of belonging, then he or she may be most motivated to learn at this level of Maslow's (1970) model.

According to Argyris and Schon (1974), all human action is based on theories of action. Espoused theories of action are those that are reported as a basis for one's actions (Argyris, 1976). Theories-in-use are the theories of action concluded from how people actually behave, including any relatively or directly observable behaviors. According to the behavioral findings of Argyris (1976), "most individuals studied seem to be able to detect the discrepancies between their espoused theories and theories-in-use of others, but were not able to detect similar discrepancies in themselves" (p. 367). Learning eventually results in changes of action and not just the taking in of new information and formation of new ideas (Senge, 1992). According to Senge, gaps between espoused theories and theories-in-use should not cause discouragement as they can arise as a consequence of vision. Senge asserts the recognition of the gap between espoused theories and theories-in-use is the first step in learning. Furthermore, if an individual does not value the espoused theory as part of his or her vision, then there is no real tension between the person's reality and vision.

### **Methodology**

Qualitative research involves studying people or things in a natural environment in order to better understand their meaning (Merriam, 2009). Until recently, qualitative studies on leadership were considered relatively rare (Klenke, 2008). According to Geertz (1973), qualitative

research methods add value to the study of leadership because they provide rich, thick description of phenomena, which helps in the capture of multiple views and voices. Also, qualitative methods in leadership studies offer ways to explore symbolic dimensions (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). A qualitative research design was chosen for this study because it allowed for special attention to be given to the exploration of program graduates' opinions, beliefs, and experiences.

The target population for this study was the graduates of the CCLA program from 2005 to 2015. We used typical purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009) and maximum variation of the subjects was sought through a process of selection based on graduates' CCLA class number, class size, gender, geographic location, and position held in their respective counties. At the time of the study, the CCLA program had graduated approximately 54 participants since its formation. Within each two-year class, the number of graduates varied depending on the year and the number of applicants. We contacted participants of the study for their consent using an IRB approved email protocol.

According to Patton (2002), maximum variation sampling is ideal for diversifying your sample population to "avoid one-sidedness of representation of the topic" (p. 109). To purposefully select participants for the study with maximum variation in mind, we developed a system for selection. First, we reviewed a list of graduate names printed in order of class number; the names within each class were listed in alphabetical order by the county he or she represented. We pre-determined a number of class members to contact initially based on the total number of members in each class. Classes one, two, and three graduated seven, 10, and seven participants, respectively. We chose to initially contact three members of each of these classes to participate in the study. Classes four and five graduated 17 and 14 members, respectively. Four members of each of these classes were chosen initially to participate in the study. Then, because of the significantly low number of female graduates listed, at least half of the number of females in each of the classes were selected to be contacted initially for participation in the study. Finally, the differentiation of regional representation, as outlined by the Regional Associations of County Judges and Commissioners (Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, n.d.), was determined as a factor for the selection of participants to initially contact to be in the study. Using the initial criteria of class number, class size, gender, and regional representation, the top of the list of names for each class was used to select participants to contact for the study. Of the initial 17 graduates contacted by email to request participation in the study, eight graduates responded, seven of whom agreed to participate.

For the second attempt to contact graduates of the program, we used similar criteria for selection; however, in the second attempt, four graduate names were selected to contact from classes one and two. Also, attention was paid to whether the graduate represented a county that had not yet been represented by those graduates who were initially contacted and agreed to participate in the study; this rule was ignored if the graduate was female. Some graduates were also passed over in the second selection process based on their regional and county location; we wanted to purposefully contact graduates from across the state and as equally as possible by region. Of the 19 graduates contacted for study participation, four graduates responded and agreed to participate in the study and were interviewed. After completing interviews with the 11 total graduates who agreed to participate in the study (i.e., seven from the first attempt and four from the second attempt), no other graduates were contacted due to data saturation (Merriam, 2009).

The 11 participants of this study represented all five graduated classes of the program. Three participants represented class I. Three participants represented class II. One participant represented class III. Three participants represented class IV. One participant represented class V. There were three female participants and eight male participants. Four of the participants were currently serving as county judges, and seven of the participants were currently serving as county commissioners. Participants were serving in counties located in southeast Texas, central Texas, northwest Texas, and west Texas.

For this study, data collection consisted of interviews and the collection of documents and records. An interview is considered to be “a conversation with a purpose” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 268). Through interviews, a researcher may obtain information about the subject’s experiences including their feelings, concerns, questions, and motivations. An interview also allows the researcher to ask for clarification on the interpretation of other sources, which may include documents, records, and earlier interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to learn from graduates of the CCLA program about their perceptions and opinions regarding the impacts of the program, the strengths and weaknesses of the program, and future engagement with the program. The interview questions were open-ended with the intention of collecting data in the following areas: impacts of the program on graduates’ personal lives, impacts of the program on graduates’ leadership, impacts of the program on graduates’ careers, the level of desired future engagement in the program, and recommendations for future opportunities to engage graduates in the program. It should be noted that this study was part of a larger study and thus the interview questions were written to address more than one research question. The semi-structured interview questions asked to all participants of this study were as follows:

1. Why did you choose to apply for the CCLA program?
2. What do you think were the objectives of the program?
3. What do you think were the strengths and weaknesses of the program?
4. What were your personal takeaways and impacts from going through the program?
5. If another opportunity to engage somehow in the program was offered for you as a graduate, would you want to be a part of it? If so, what kind(s) of opportunities would you want offered to you as a graduate of the program?

In-person interviews were conducted with three of the selected participants, while phone interviews were conducted with the other 8 participants. The interviews lasted no longer than 90 minutes. Field notes were used to document the interviews. We used “empathic neutrality and mindfulness” as a fieldwork strategy when interviewing the participants (Patton, 2002, p. 40). This strategy is defined as having “an empathic stance in interviewing” and “understanding without judgment (neutrality) by showing openness, sensitivity, respect, awareness, and responsiveness” (Patton, 2002, p. 40). Participants were also asked to share any documents and/or records which could pertain to examples of the impacts of the CCLA program. Documents and records are another source of data that added value to the study. These pieces of information served as proof of past experiences. We were responsible for gaining proper permission to view any documents and records (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The examples of documents and records that we collected from the participants in this study included emails, correspondences with constituents, awards, written articles, and other items demonstrating the impact of the CCLA program.

Upon completion of each interview, the handwritten field notes were typed and first organized according to the interview question. Participants were assigned a random number; these numbers were used to code the participants’ responses in the notes. The interview questions served as initial categories; however, the responses provided were organized under multiple questions depending on what was said and whether it was relevant to answering the question category. Thus, the response to one question could have been organized so as to fall under multiple categories so as to provide as much data as possible for theme analysis. Responses in each category were analyzed using the constant comparative analysis strategy to identify emerging themes (Merriam, 2009). Through this method, smaller categories of data were formed as we recognized similarities and differences in the data. We continued in this process until clear thematic patterns emerged in the smaller categories that were agreed upon by all of the researchers involved in this study.

### **Study Trustworthiness**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the appropriate criteria for the trustworthiness of the naturalistic paradigm include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This study confirmed credibility of the data collected through the use of triangulation in the data interpretation process. First, multiple sources of data allowed for triangulation of the sources as the data collected came from people with different perspectives (Merriam, 2009). Also, “methods triangulation” occurred through the use of different methods of data collection, including interviews and documents (Patton, 2002, p. 556). Second, peer debriefs, also known as analyst triangulation, helped with overseeing the data analysis so as to triangulate the interpretation of the data through independent perspectives (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). We performed “theory/perspective triangulation” by using multiple perspectives or theories to interpret the data (Patton, 2002, p. 556).

This study also assured trustworthiness through respondent validation, or member checking. We solicited feedback on data interpretations by taking the preliminary analysis of the data collected and sending it back to the participants in the study for their confirmation. Furthermore, maximum variation of the sample selected to use in this study ensured a greater chance of data trustworthiness. Rich, thick descriptions of the findings provided readers with context to understand the transferability of the study to their current situations. Lastly, audit trails were used to examine the data process and establish dependability and confirmability in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Audit trail categories used in this study include raw data, process notes, data reconstruction and synthesis products (including created themes and categories), and the study’s research design.

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to identify the impacts and outcomes of the CCLA program. The following thematic categories emerged from the data: Affective Impacts, Behavioral Impacts, Cognitive Impacts, and Overarching Impact: Networking and Relationships. “Affective Impacts” were described as those outcomes reported by participants that showed changes or emphasis in participants’ emotions and outlook from completing the program. “Behavioral Impacts” were defined as the outcomes reported by participants that demonstrated changes in participants’ behaviors after completing the program. “Cognitive Impacts” were defined as those outcomes reported by participants who indicated participants’ new knowledge or understanding upon program completion. The “Overarching Impact: Networking and Relationships” was described as those outcomes reported by participants who have influence on the other three categories of impacts because of the participants’ reported formed networks and relationships from the program.

#### **Affective Impacts**

It was evident that participants’ reported enthusiasm for the academy was an affective outcome of the program. Participants conveyed many positive emotions about the program. Participant P1 said that upon graduating from the program, both she and her classmates “had this energy to use what tools [they] had been given and seek more.” Participant P2 said to the interviewer about her positive remarks of the program, “There’s nothing I haven’t told you that I haven’t told 20,000 people.” Both participants P4 and P7 expressed the importance of the academy and its need to continue to provide education for future county commissioners and judges. Participant P7 recognized Texas A&M’s role in the academy and appreciated “the university for providing” it. Participant P6 said, “I am passionate about [CCLA] because I believe in it.” Participant P9 said he couldn’t “say enough good things” about the academy.

A reported change in participants’ confidence levels was another clear affective outcome from program participation. Participant P1 expressed that she is now “more comfortable expressing

[her] issues and concerns” in the context of her job. Participant P5 made several statements regarding the confidence he gained from the academy. Participant P5 said, “[The academy] helped build my confidence as a speaker and a leader—especially with working with three levels of government...I now ask more of the not-so-obvious questions. I don’t take things at the surface. I sometimes play the devil’s advocate.” Participant P7 shared a story about gaining the confidence to skydive after going through the program:

During our academy [class], I made a comment during a social hour that one of the things I always wanted to do was skydive. [A fellow classmate] said she had done a tandem jump and that we should do that after graduation from the academy. So, the day after graduation, we played golf in the morning and then a small group of us met at [location] Skydive and jumped. Leadership Academy and skydiving, two great experiences, and I treasure them both. (P7)

As a reported affective outcome of the program, all 11 participants conveyed a desire to be engaged in the program in the future if the opportunity was made available. As one form of future engagement, participants expressed desire to volunteer and serve future classes (P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9, P10, & P11). Several of the participants expressed interest in volunteering as speakers for program sessions (P3, P6, P9, P10, & P11). Participant P3 said, “I’ve got 20 years of experience and I’d be willing to share that on a range of topics.” Some concerns were expressed in accompaniment with participants’ desire to be a part of the program in the future. Participant P11 voiced that he thought “older folks should come out and visit with the new class...maybe through some sort of meeting maybe at the conferences once or twice a year” in order to “talk to the new folks.” Participants P1, P4, and P6 all discussed time and feasibility as factors in their future involvement with the program. Participant P4 said about volunteering in the program, “All of us like to serve in some capacity, but do we have time? I have the time, but others may not.” Similarly, participant P6 said, “If I was 35-40 years old, I’d seek much more involvement...My involvement is limited because of my age and time in office.”

Participants also expressed interest in follow-up or next-level program opportunities for those who have been through the academy (P1, P2, P4, P5, P7, & P11). As participant P5 stated, “This is a great program, but it leaves you thirsty for more.” Participant P2 said, “Within a heartbeat, I’d participate in another program.” Participant P4 compared the benefits of going through a second level of the program to those of someone with a bachelor’s degree who wants to continue in a master’s program. Participant P7 said she “would be pleased to do another round of the leadership academy—an advanced program maybe...that [would] touch on [her] ability to work with others.” Likewise, participant P11 thought team-building exercises would be great for the focus of a second-level program course. Ideas for another part of the program for graduates included “a follow-up annual event or class or conference” (P1), an “inspirational speech” (P5), a “two-day event” with a focus on problem-solving or “something hands-on” (P5), or an additional piece to one of the other Texas county conferences (P5). Participant P11 conveyed that a “follow-up” is needed for recent class graduates to be asked “How are you doing?” and “How are you using what you learned?”

The participants also described the idea of a program reunion as a form of future engagement in the academy (P4, P6, P8, P10, & P11). Participant P6 said, “One thing I have talked about with my classmates is that we wish there were more alumni type meetings...not only to reminisce but also to stay connected more and continue to be a part of the program.” Similarly, participant P8 remarked that she “would love to see reunions happen for the classes to mix and mingle again.” Participant P11 expressed he would love to see his fellow classmates in a relaxed setting, saying “You know, you’re meeting folks in a pretty intense time frame, folks of different counties. We go to all these meetings and see each other. We need the opportunity to spend time



with each other.” Participant P4 said he thought a reunion for the program could easily be incorporated as part of one of the association conferences.

Participant P9 conveyed that the academy helped him gain “an appreciation for our country and government.” In regards to this new appreciation he said: “You know we hear the news and watch the news—we’re quick to judge national issues—but having gone to DC and seeing what goes on—but having walked through Arlington Cemetery and seeing those who have died for our country [while in DC with the program]—we know people are free to express different opinions, and our country is big enough for those different opinions” (P9).

### **Behavioral Impacts**

Participants reported having sought out and received other leadership positions as a result of going through the program. Participant P1 said, “Since the class, I’ve taken on even more leadership roles.” Two of the leadership roles that participant P1 said she received “because of the program” was the State Affairs-Vice Chair and Secretary of Election & Credentials for the Texas Silver-Haired Legislature. Since graduating from the academy, participant P4 now works “a lot with the West Texas association and state association.” Participant P5 credits the academy for providing him with the leadership and confidence to “throw his hat in the running” for a county association officer position at the state level. He also mentioned that serving “as the president in 2012-2013 for the West Texas Association” (P5) was a result of going through the program. Upon graduating from the academy, participant P6 said he has served as a leading officer for four different associations tied to county government as well as in other leadership positions outside of government. Participant P11 said, “I’ve seen the growth of other commissioners who were new to [county government] when they entered the Academy and have now went [sic] on to become presidents of our associations and have really gotten involved.”

Participants testified to having worked better with others since going through the program (P1, P2, P4, P7, P8, P9, & P10). Participant P2 said that what she learned from the academy has helped her as she has dealt with constituents. Participant P2 conveyed that halfway through her program experience she was able to begin using what she learned about relationships to “deal with other members of the court.” She said about her fellow court members, “If I hadn’t went [sic] through the course, we would have killed each other” (P2). Participant P10 said he learned how to “show [court members] the benefits [to his point]” and “get their ground.” Participant P8 still keeps her academy notebook intact to refer back to notes on a “fairly regular basis.” She conveyed that she has used her notes to look up information about dealing with different personality types (P8). Participant P9 said that because of the program he is now able to communicate and work with others who see things differently than him. He also conveyed that he learned how to “be more patient in working through problems” and to “not getting red-faced but staying calm” from the program.

Participant P10 recalled a story about “a confrontation with a constituent” in which an article was written about himself by the constituent and printed in the county newspaper. Participant P10 conveyed that he “took that [article written about him] to [his academy] class and asked them how they would respond.” Participant P10 also explained that this took place during his campaign for his second term. He said his classmates were able to give him advice on how he should respond and proceed.

Since completing the program, participants expressed a change in their interview skills (P1, P2, P7, P8, P9, & P10). Participant P1 said the program made her “more conscientious of [her] statements.” “I strive to speak with clarity because I now know how important it is to speaking with professionals” (P1). Participant P9 told a story about being interviewed previously. He said he was able to stay focused because of his focus on the notes from the academy session “even

though the interviewer kept trying to get [him] off track.” Participant P9 said, “That class really helped me with getting my thoughts together and to stay focused...Every time I’m interviewed I go back to my core statements on public service and public safety.” Participant P10 told a similar story, saying, “We’ve had some issues in our county where I had to be interviewed... [Because of the academy] I learned some tools to deal with the media.” Participant P10 conveyed that he has “reflected back” on notes from the academy to help him with interviews. “The handouts we received [from the program] were beneficial. The media training handouts I’ve referred back to for guidelines in writing articles” (P10).

As an artifact representing the impacts of the media training session, participant P9 gave the interviewer a web link to an interview that was conducted and aired after he completed the CCLA program. He said the following about the interview:

The reporter wanted to interview me on why [county] spent almost \$600,000 in association dues. I knew that this could be a tough interview, so I reflected on [the CCLA program’s session on] media training and developed my “Key Message” before he arrived. Before the camera was turned on, I explained in detail that we had only spent \$127,000 in association dues, not \$600,000. The reporter then shifted to the real reason he wanted to talk to me on camera...tax funded Lobbyist. He grilled me for 45 minutes on the subject and it was by far, the most difficult interview that I have ever had. I was not prepared for this line of questions, but I continued to try and remain focused. Thirty minutes into the interview, the reporter actually became angry with my responses to his questions because I would not deviate from my key message. Although I am not pleased with the outcome, it could have been much worse had I not had the media training that VG Young provided in the Leadership Academy. (P9)

Participants testified to having encouraged other county commissioners and judges to apply for the CCLA program (P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, & P9). Participant P5 conveyed that he has encouraged a fellow county court member to apply for the program. Participant P6 has also encouraged others to go through the academy. Participant P6 conveyed the knowledge that the academy does not always have full classes. “The CCLA should have a waiting line... people should have a desire to grow in their leadership and grow professionally” (P6). Participant P6 also said he has worked on the obtainment of scholarship funding to help members of his county association pay for the program registration. Participant P7 recommended the program to his brother, who serves as a county commissioner in another county and is now in the current class of the academy.

### **Cognitive Impacts**

As a result of going through the program, participants reported several cognitive impacts, including an increased knowledge of government at the county, state, and federal levels (P2, P4, P5, P7, P9, P10, & P11). Participant P5 said the academy taught him things about “how the dominos fall from the top down” in regards to how “legislature’s actions” lead to “reactions in the county.” Meeting different legislators through the academy was described as educational for how to be involved at the state level (P10).

Just as participants reported behavioral impacts from the program including working with others more efficiently, participants also expressed an increased cognitive knowledge of personalities and relationships (P1, P2, P4, P7, P8, P9, P10, & P11). Participant P2 said the lessons on personalities “allowed [her] to see the others in the program, and to see other commissioners.” Similarly, participant P11 said the lessons on personalities helped him work better with others serving with him on the commissioner’s court. Participant P10 said he learned about “conflict management” from the academy. “You need [conflict management] in the commissioner’s job

because you deal with conflict a lot... You're working with other commissioners on the court and you have to work through differences of opinion" (P10). Participants described many cognitive lessons about relationships and personalities as from the program session with the horse whisperer. Participant P2 said she learned about body language from the horse whisperer. Participant P4 said the horse whisperer session taught him "how we can relate to different perspectives and relate to different constituents." Similarly, participant P6 found the horse whisperer session to be interesting and beneficial, saying "It really brought out the aspect of dealing with different personalities [and] how we have to lead different people in different ways. "[The horse whisperer session] really focused us on how to see the differences in people." Participant P8 said she "learned so much" from the horse whisperer session "You learn when to pick your battles, when to apply patience, when to apply pressure... It taught you how to bring out the strengths of others and not harp on the weaknesses" (P8).

### **Overarching Impacts: Networking and Relationships**

Many participants expressed an increase in their network of relationships as a positive outcome of the program (P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, & P11). This reported outcome was recognized as an overarching theme that influenced the affective, behavioral, and cognitive impacts identified in this study. Participant P1 said she gained a "lifelong engagement with other counties." She said, "When I go to conferences, I feel like I got big brothers watching out for me" (P1). A fellow classmate from the program gave participant P1 a wreath that hangs in her office currently. "The friendships we made from the program are still going on [today]," said participant P2. According to participant P6, there is "the circle of people you work with" and "to be able to grow you have to expand your circle of influence." Participant P6 called upon friends from the program when he ran for office again. "The building of relationships and a network is important... There's no way to quantify it... Life itself is based on relationships," said participant P6.

Participant P7 said he still talks to his classmates about his "personal life" and "county life." "The individuals I went through the Academy with are very special to me... We formed a special bond," said participant P7. Participant P8 remains "very close to [her] classmates," calling them regularly to ask about their perspectives. She thinks this is "one of the things that has made [the academy] so rewarding" (P8). "The networking was the most valuable part of the academy," said participant P8. When participant P9 was charged with putting together a panel for a V.G. Young conference, he "called upon some of [his] classmates to serve on the panel." Participant P10 said, "I got to know other commissioners [through the academy] ... It's like a homecoming every time we meet!" Participant P10 told a story about calling upon a fellow classmate who had experience dealing with "unit road systems" in her county. He said, "Her perspective was very helpful" when the same road system was implemented in his county during his second term.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to identify the impacts of the CCLA program on its graduates. This study was limited by its reach and application given that the study focused solely on one Extension-based leadership development program for public servants in the state of Texas. Though this study is not generalizable to other populations, the findings do provide insight as to how participants describe a specific leadership development program and its outcomes. These participant descriptions could be of value to those conducting similar programs. The impacts of the CCLA program were described in four ways: affective impacts, behavioral impacts, cognitive impacts, and an overarching impact of networking and relationships. The program impacts demonstrate the presented review of adult learning and leadership development theories.

Affective impacts were described as those outcomes that showed changes or emphasis in participants' emotions and outlook from completing the program. The affective impacts reported

by participants were: greater enthusiasm for the program, an increase in confidence, and a desire for future engagement in the academy. Participants described future engagement possibilities to include volunteering to serve the program, learning more from the program in a follow-up or second-level course, or attending a reunion for the program's graduates. The affective impacts reported by participants align with the humanist orientation to learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Internal changes in attitudes, beliefs, and self-perception can all be a part of one's development as a whole person. Participants' descriptions of future engagement possibilities also resemble actions associated with the three highest levels of Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs: belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. For example, participants' desire to engage in reunions with graduates demonstrates their motivation to belong with their fellow classmates. Participants' desire to engage in higher levels of learning in the program may represent their motivation for esteem in their knowledge. Also, participants' desire to engage in service could be linked to their self-actualization as servant leaders in their communities and in the program.

Behavioral impacts were described as outcomes that demonstrated changes in participants' behaviors after completing the program. The behavioral impacts reported by participants included: having sought out and received other leadership positions, working more efficiently with others, better interview skills, and having encouraged others to apply for the program. The behavioral impacts reported by participants closely align with the behaviorist orientation to learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The identified behavioral impacts are all observable manifestations of what was learned from the program. Also, the behavioral impacts are outcomes that were reported to have reoccurred since the program and can be repeated in the future, thereby reinforcing the behavioral learning. The reported changes in participants' behaviors are an indication of the program's external role in participants' learning processes.

Cognitive impacts were described as those outcomes that indicated participants' new knowledge or understanding upon completing the program. The cognitive impacts reported by participants were: a better understanding of government at all levels and a greater understanding of different personalities. The cognitive impacts reported by participants closely align with the cognitive orientation to learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The identified cognitive impacts required participants to process, remember, and perceive information provided by the program. These actions are all characteristic of cognitive learning.

The discussion of the differences and relationship between espoused theories of action and theories-in-use (Argyris, 1976; Argyris & Schon, 1974; Senge, 1992) helps with understanding the possible relationship between the reported affective, behavioral, and cognitive impacts of the CCLA program. Whereas the affective and cognitive impacts that participants reported can be understood as espoused theories of action, the behavioral impacts of the study can be understood as theories-in-use. For example, participants' reported cognitive program impact of understanding personalities may have influenced participants' reported behavioral program impact of working with others better. Likewise, participants' reported affective program impact of increased confidence may have influenced participants' reported behavioral program impact of seeking and receiving other leadership positions.

The findings also reflect the emergence of an overarching impact of the program that influences the affective, behavioral, and cognitive impacts of the program. Participants richly described the impact of a gained network of relationships as a result of participating in the academy. This network was described as beneficial to both the participants' careers and personal lives. This finding aligns with the social learning orientation to learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). It is also an overarching impact that supports what is understood about social capital as an outcome of leadership development programming (Terroin, 2006; Van De Valk & Constatas, 2011). Although Van De Valk and Constatas (2011) were unable to establish a causal relationship between leadership development programs and social capital, Van De Valk (2008) recognized the importance of social

capital as it pertained to the purposes of adult leadership development programs. The gained social network reported as an overarching impact has implications for leadership growth and learning beyond the CCLA program. Terroin's (2006) conclusions about the impact of social capital on individuals who have completed leadership programs support this identified and overarching impact.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The findings of this study serve as a foundation for future studies focused on the evaluation of agricultural leadership programs. In fact, several new research questions emerged from study findings. One question that emerged from the study is how might program outcomes relate to the program's curriculum? We recommend building on the findings of this study through additional research focused on analyzing the curriculum of the academy using leadership development theories. Although participants in this study were able to describe impacts based on completion of the program, the participants were not asked to describe the program's curriculum or any specific theories or concepts taught in the program; thus, information about how the curriculum impacts graduates could not be readily assessed. It would be valuable to program administrators to know how the program's curriculum compares to current leadership development theories and approaches.

In addition, further research should also be conducted using interviews with the former CCLA program director, the current program director, and fellow county commissioners and judges who work with graduates of the program but who have not gone through the program themselves. Although this study used self-reports of outcomes and impacts from the program, efforts should be made to triangulate the self-reported data using a variety of sources of data so as to avoid subjection to biases (Russon & Reinelt, 2004). The current program director and former program director may have insight regarding additional outcomes and impacts resulting from the academy as well as possible testimonies to confirm this study's findings. Interviews with coworkers of graduates may provide evidence to confirm or refute the participants' self-reports of outcomes and impacts.

### **Recommendation for Program Practice and Community Leadership**

We recommend that the CCLA program consider developing opportunities to utilize the social networks of relationships formed through the academy. These networks may be instrumental for the mobilization of grassroots efforts and community leadership in the state of Texas. Program graduates are united in purpose and developed skillsets because of the program, and thus could be focused to take on key issues in the state from a community level. The relationships formed as a result of the academy may also be useful to researchers looking to study county leadership or social capital. Just as Van De Valk (2008) noted a lack of research pertaining to social capital's influence in leadership development, the findings of this study points researchers to opportunities to examine how the CCLA program's social networks are enhancing continued leadership development in participants beyond the program.

### **Final Conclusions**

Through the collection and interpretation of participants' experiences in the CCLA program, we identified the reported learning outcomes of the program and recommended opportunities for program improvement. Documents and records were collected as artifacts of the program; however, participants provided very few artifacts, and thus we were disappointed in this aspect of the data collection. The few documents provided did support the themes that were formed from the data analysis. This study provides the CCLA program with a more complete picture of the program's impacts and opportunities for improvement or modification. It is our hope that the

CCLA program may use the findings of this study to better serve Texas county commissioners and judges and thus continue to develop better leaders and county servants for the state of Texas.

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