

EVALUATION OF THE FLORIDA LEADERSHIP PROGRAM FOR AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

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Abstract

Alumni from the Florida Leadership Program for Agriculture and Natural Resources (FLPANR) were interviewed to evaluate the effectiveness of this program, and to determine if the program is meeting the goals and objectives it set forth. The FLPANR is an intensive two-year program, which is divided into nine seminar sessions that address local, regional, national, and international issues that have an impact on Florida agriculture and natural resources. The population for this study consisted of a purposefully selected sample of past participants who represented different classes of the program, different agriculturally oriented industries, and different regions of the state. In addition to the interviews program participants, their spouses, and a business associate were also interviewed. The participants, spouses, and associates indicated that networking, increased leadership skills, a broader perspective of Florida agriculture, an increased ability to identify and address issues, an increased appreciation of the diversity in people, and a basis to continue to learn and develop were the major benefits of this program. Based on the findings of this study, the researchers concluded that this program is equipping those in agriculture and natural resources with the skills and abilities necessary to be effective leaders in their representative industries now, and in the future.

Introduction

Leadership is not an innate characteristic, it can be developed through formal and informal training (Bolton, 1991). Leadership can also be developed through properly designed leadership programs (Earnest, 1996). Some basic questions need to be answered when developing leadership programs. If leadership is taught, what is the curriculum? If leadership is developed, what is the process? How is leadership acquired? How is the development of leadership fostered (Miller, 1967)?

Agricultural and natural resource leadership programs are designed to expand the horizons of young leaders involved in agricultural and natural resource pursuits, by exposing them to study and experiences. Participants are exposed to leadership development and gain a knowledge that is not readily acquired through day to day agricultural and related occupations. These leadership programs assume that skills, knowledge, and attitudes of a leader can be learned (Bolton, 1991).

The Florida Leadership Program for Agriculture and Natural Resources was officially implemented October 1, 1991 to provide future leaders in Florida agriculture and related areas with the skills necessary to achieve their leadership potential. The Florida Leadership Program for Agriculture and Natural Resources is closely patterned after successful programs in California, Arizona, Texas, Alabama, Michigan, Washington, and Ontario (Trotter, 1991).

The goal of the Florida Leadership Program is “to develop and refine the leadership capabilities of young leaders who in turn will be prepared to become increasingly involved in policy formation—be it policy that directly applies to all segments of Florida agriculture or public policy that will effect the future of Florida agriculture either in a direct or indirect manner” (Trotter, 1991).

The objectives for the Florida program were developed when the program was established, yet no evaluation has been done to see if the program is meeting its’ objectives, which are as follows:

1. Develop a better understanding of people—themselves, fellow citizens, their environment and their personal and group aspirations.
2. Build an understanding of social, economic, and political systems in which people function.
3. Analyze complex issues facing people interested in areas related to agriculture, natural resources and rural communities.
4. Develop an understanding of the American political system and how to work within this system to effectively bring about change.
5. Improve inner-personal skills to more effectively work with people from diverse backgrounds.
6. Establish a basis for life-long development and growth.

Theoretical Framework

Chemers (1997) stated "a definition of leadership that would be widely accepted by the majority of theorists and researchers might say that 'leadership is a process of social influence in which one person is able to enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task'". Leaders have a multitude of functions, they must be able to offer direction and motivation, solve problems, analyze information, and inspire confidence in those around them (Chemers, 1997). How is leadership taught to individuals? Bolton (1991) suggested that leadership development is a culmination of many disciplines including: sociology, organizational development, educational leadership, and business management. Leadership development can enhance the ability of individuals to participate in groups and organizations and allows them to develop the necessary leadership skills to lead these groups (Dhanakumar et al., 1996). Leadership development is continuous throughout life, and because of this, it is often hard to identify and measure leadership characteristics and abilities (Brungardt, 1996).

"Agricultural leadership, as all leadership, rests on an ever increasing sense of reality, a searching for connections and relationships, an intellect which relates beliefs to the appropriate ends for human activity and the means to achieve such ends. The agriculture sector cannot, any less than others, escape the relatedness of aesthetic, intellectual, and moral values which are found in cultures other than its own. This is the essence of both leadership and public responsibility" (The Cooperative Extension Service [CES], 1965). This statement was made in a 1965 proposal to the Kellogg Foundation for a Farmer's Study Program on Agriculture's Role in an Industrializing Society. The program became known as the Kellogg Farmer's Study Program, and formed the basis for many of the existing agricultural leadership programs that began with funds from the Kellogg Foundation in North America.

Several states still follow a program that is a refinement of the original Kellogg Farmers' Study Program. These programs expose their participants to a broad range of state and national issues that are not sector-specific. Additionally, they strive to give their classes an overview of issues facing education, the environment, families, health care, the political system, and the urban populations of their state and nation (Johnson, 1998). The basis is that the participants must understand the larger society before they can be effective in dealing with other groups to address agricultural issues. Content areas are not approached as single entities; instead the programs are built on the interrelationship of subjects and their relationships to leadership (Andrews et al., 1985). Even though many of the programs are a current version of the original Kellogg Farmers' Study Program, they differ in some ways to meet the needs of the current generation of participants (Andrews et al., 1985).

Many agricultural leadership programs exist in North America as a result of the early work of the Kellogg Program. Although these programs differ in format and length, they are all basically geared towards the same agricultural-based audience. Program size varies with each state, with thirty participants per class being the average. Some programs make thirty the maximum goal, enrolling less in the program if qualified people to participate cannot be identified (Johnson, 1998). Most programs target participants in the 25-45 year old age range. Age limits are common with most programs, some do have an upper age limit, and most have a minimum age of twenty-five. Potential participants are often determined by sponsoring organizations (Johnson, 1998), nominations from industry representatives and active program alumni, and from recruitment.

There are many common goals of these agricultural leadership programs. Some of the common goals include: increase participant's understanding of political, social, and economic systems, develop personal skills, expand individual networks, become effective spokespersons for their industry, and develop future political, civic, and organizational leaders. The central focus of agricultural leadership programs is to "polish" demonstrated young leaders in a target population. Others wish to encourage and develop potential leaders (Johnson, 1998). Generally these leadership programs have two tasks: developing leadership skills in the participants, and enhancing their knowledge on topics that deal with food systems, policy-making, or international economic institutions (Johnson, 1998).

In his review of community leadership programs, Earnest (1996) found many benefits. Not surprisingly, one of the biggest benefits of these programs is increased leadership skills. Additional benefits of agricultural leadership programming is increased involvement in citizen and volunteer activities, increased confidence in the participants, and increased networking among participants. A broadened or different perspective was also reported. Johnson (1998), in his review of agriculturally based leadership programs stated that "every graduate from these agriculture leadership programs benefit from the networking that results from these programs". In their evaluation of the PRO-MISS Class II Cohen and Beaulieu (1994) found that the leadership program helped improve the participants' leadership skills on several different dimensions. In this study, the participants reported more confidence in their leadership skills after they completed the program, and as a group, they were more willing to use these skills to benefit their communities.

Measuring the success of leadership programs is a difficult undertaking. The program's goals must be clearly known for evaluation. Not every participant will run for public office, or excel in his or her industry. The Texas Agricultural Lifetime Leadership Program's web page realistically states that the results will not be known for ten years after its participants graduate (Johnson, 1998). In Bolton's (1991) study of a community-based leadership

program, it was found that participants gained in the knowledge of leadership skills, but they did not feel that the leadership course had greatly increased their confidence or ability to implement these skills.

Results of many of these leadership programs may not be known for many due to the lack of detailed evaluations and the fact that many of the changes the participants undergo are not seen until some time after program completion. Johnson (1998) states that "it is the leadership programs' longevity that give them their impressive potential for change. These programs produce graduates who are 'lifetime' leaders and learners".

Howell, Weir, and Cook (1982) provided theoretical considerations for leadership development programs. They stated that "leadership development programs were designed to help participants learn new behaviors and skills that would enable them to participate more effectively in public affairs". They explained that observed behavior changes could be explained by role, motivation, and social exchange theories which could be linked back to the educational components of the leadership development programs.

In addition to the theoretical considerations of these agriculture leadership programs, there are several specific program goals and components that are the basis for these programs, and the foundations for leadership development in the participants. These can be divided into the same categories as the instrument questions used to determine the effectiveness of this program, the categories are: people skills, policy development, analytical skills, and personal development. Found within these categories are many of the themes found in the evaluations of other programs, and themes that will hopefully be present in the findings of the evaluation conducted on the Florida Leadership Program for Agriculture and Natural Resources. These include: building of individual networks, increased leadership skills, broadened perspective of Florida Agriculture and natural resources, issue identification, working with a diversity of people, increased critical thinking skills, and the desire to continue to learn and develop. These can be taught through the structured seminar environment provided by the leadership programs, the travel throughout the state, region, nation, and world, and through the participants own personal interactions with people they have encountered through the program.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The Florida Leadership Program for Agriculture and Natural Resources began in 1991. Three classes of graduates have completed the program. Class IV began in the summer of 1999. At the end of each two-year class, participants are given an evaluation. The results of the evaluation are intended to improve the quality of the program. The current evaluation does not measure what participants gain from the program. To date, no study has been conducted to determine what participants are taking away from this two-year educational endeavor. Does the program meet its objectives? Do participants implement what they learn in their own life, and have they made personal and professional changes in their lives as a result of the program? The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which objectives of the Florida Leadership Program for Agriculture and Natural Resources were met by its' participants.

The objectives of this study were to:

1. Assess the program's impacts on the participant as perceived by the participant,
2. Assess the program's impacts on the participant as perceived by the participant's spouse, assess the program's impacts on the participant as perceived by a third party who would be aware of changes in the individual, and compare common impacts among these three groups with the objectives of the program.

Methodology

The data collected from the interviews was qualitative in nature. The goal of qualitative analysis is to isolate and define categories during the research project, but also to expect that these categories will change during the course of the research (McCracken, 1988). Several other evaluations such as Dhanahkumar, Rossing, & Campbell's (1996) evaluation of the Wisconsin Rural Leaders Perspective Program, and Whent, Leising, & Tibbits' (1990) evaluation of the California Agriculture Leadership Program, gathered data using qualitative techniques.

Qualitative data or the use of interviews or focus groups provides depth and detail through the use of direct quotations and thorough descriptions of the program. These descriptions are collected as open-ended narrative without attempting to fit the descriptions into predetermined, standardized categories like choices that are found on questionnaires or tests (Patton, 1987). Patterns, themes, and categories emerge from the data rather than being decided upon prior to data collection (Patton, 1987).

The population of this study consisted of alumni from the first three classes of the program, their spouses (or significant individuals in their lives), and their employers or business partners. These three groups were used to achieve triangulation, Triangulation builds checks and balances into a design through the use of multiple data collection strategies; the triangulated design is aimed at increasing the rigor and strength of an evaluation. It also solves the problem of relying too much on any single data source or method and undermining the credibility of the findings of this method or source because of the weaknesses that may be found in a method or source (Patton, 1987).

Eight participants from each class were chosen based on their geographic distribution and commodity representation throughout Florida. The state was broken into four regions (North, East Central, West Central, and South), and two participants from each class were chosen for each region. The participants' spouses were interviewed to discuss whether or not the program has had an impact in the life of the participant, or on their life as the participants' spouse. The spouses were chosen because of their close proximity to the individual, and their ability to distinguish any inherent changes in the individual. The participants' employers were chosen because they have a vested interest in the success of the individual. Both will also be able to tell if the participant has implemented any changes in his/her life.

An interview questionnaire was used to gather data during the interview process. The use of the questionnaire ensures that the material is covered in the same order for each respondent (McCracken, 1988 & Patton, 1987). Patton (1987) stated that "the purpose of gathering responses to open-ended questions is to permit the evaluator to understand and capture the perspective of program participants without predetermining the perspective through prior selection of questionnaire categories". This questionnaire consisted of eight questions that were slightly altered for each group. These eight questions were derived from four constructs or areas, which were obtained from the objectives of the Florida Leadership Program and the original Kellogg Program. These four construct areas were identified as People Skills, Policy Development, Analytical Skills, and Personal Skills. Two questions per area were developed to assess knowledge that they gained in these four construct areas. The questions asked were relevant to what the participants learned, what their goals are, and what, if anything had they implemented from the program into their professional and personal lives. The questions used were as follows:

People Skills

1. How has the program helped you interact more effectively with people, both personally and professionally?
2. What were the most important leadership skills you either learned or refined during the two year program to help you lead people?

Political Development

1. What did you learn about the social, economic, and political influences that impact Florida agriculture and natural resources?
2. What did you learn about the American/Floridian political system?

Analytical Skills

1. How are you better able to identify issues facing Florida agriculture and natural resources?
2. How did the program help you use critical thinking skills in your day-to-day life? For example, determining truth in statements, examining sources of information, etc.

Personal Skills

1. Has this program provided a basis for you to continue to learn and develop? How are you going to do this?
2. What inter-personal skills did the program provide, or improve upon, that allow you to deal with people from diverse backgrounds more effectively?

A panel of experts composed of faculty from the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication and the Department of Food and Resource Economics reviewed the instrument to establish validity, and changes were made based on their recommendations. To insure reliability, the instrument was field-tested with a participant from the program, her husband, and her employer. No changes were made to the instrument after field testing.

Findings and Conclusions

After analyzing the responses from all three groups, common themes were found in the responses of all groups. These common themes are as follows (Figure 1-1):

People Skills. Networking was a theme found in the responses given by all three groups as an asset that allowed the participants to interact more effectively with people. Another prevalent theme is increased organization in the participants, and that the participants deal with people more effectively, due in large part to the MBTI. All three groups who were interviewed found better communication skills as increasing the participants' leadership skills.

Policy Development. Networking was a theme found in all three groups, this allows the participants to be more aware of the influences that affect Florida agriculture and natural resources. All three groups also felt that the participants had a broader perspective of the influences and issues that occur in their industry and other industries in Florida agriculture and natural resources. The participants increased their political savvy by becoming more comfortable working within the political system, being more actively involved in the political process, and having a greater understanding of the political process were all common themes found in all three groups.

Analytical Skills. Two common themes were networking and a broader perspective of Florida agriculture and natural resources. The broader perspective given to the participants, and the contacts and relationships that develop through the program allow the participants to better identify the issues that are facing Florida agriculture and natural resources. The participants' ability to think more critically since their participation in the program was a theme echoed by all three groups.

Personal Skills. All groups agreed that this program provided a basis for the participants to continue to learn and develop, and they all agreed that the participants would do this by their involvement in the alumni association, boards, organizations, and the such. All three groups also agreed that networking would aid in the participants' continued growth and development since they would remain in contact with people who would be close to issues they might not know about. Appreciating the diversity of people, where they are coming from, what they bring to the table, and why they think they way they do was a theme that all three groups commented on when discussing the participants abilities to deal more effectively with people from diverse backgrounds.

Implications, Recommendations, and Discussion

Many common themes were found in all three groups of interviews, these can be found in Figure 1-1. These themes can be closely related to the objectives set forth by the program. The major themes that emerged from these interviews are networking, a broader perspective of the issues, an increased knowledge of people's personalities, and a continued desire to learn and keep learning throughout their life. Although everyone interviewed had different answers, gave different examples, and had different thoughts and opinions about the participants and the program, these themes were found in almost all the interviews, whether it is the participant themselves, their spouse, or an associate.

Even though each participant came away from the two-year program with something different, they shared these commonalities, and felt these to be some of the most important aspects of the program. Every person interviewed mentioned networking, and as one stated, "networking is the key". If each participant walked away from this two-year program with nothing else, they had a diverse network of individuals who would be invaluable in the future, not only as support for agriculture and natural resource related issues, but as a group. These alumni have a very powerful voice in the industry.

One thing that was not mentioned in any of the interviews was the hardships of being away from home and from the business. Even though the program places a huge time commitment on the participant, their spouse, and their associate, not one mentioned that it was a negative about the program. In fact, many of them wished that the program were longer in length, some of the participants felt that the program was too short, and felt a void when the program was over. The time commitment is a hindrance to many who think about applying for the program, but it is obvious through these interviews that the time commitment is not a negative aspect of the program. Many of the interviewees thought it was a positive experience, because the participants learned that life can go on without them, businesses can run, the family can exist without the participant right there overseeing the operations. This was a validating experience for many of the spouses and associates who gained an increase in responsibility when the participant was gone; they learned that they could handle the increased responsibility. It was also important for the participant themselves, they learned that they did not have to "micro-manage", they did not have to have their hands in everything to make it work.

From the findings it is obvious by the results from this study, that the program is not only meeting its objectives, it's exceeding them. The participants, their spouses, and their associates who were interviewed had only positive things to say about the overall learning experience provided by this program. The participants themselves, felt that their lives had been enriched by their participation in the program, and that the lessons they learned, and the contacts they made would stay with them for the rest of their lives. These results are substantiated by the responses of the spouses and associates, who only reiterated the responses given by the participants, which served to add credibility to the findings.

From the discussion of the findings, a few major observations were made:

1. This program should be continued well into the future.
2. Not only should the program be continued, but also a second phase of the program should be implemented for graduates of the program to continue their leadership development.
3. The Alumni Association should continue to remain strong and active. With the implementation of ClassIV this year and a successive class every two years, this alumni organization has the potential to be a powerful voice for agriculture and natural resources in the State of Florida.
4. Be aware of subtle changes being made by the participants. A few responses in this section of questioning believed that the participants became more "cynical" since their participation in the program, which may not be a positive attribute of the program, and one that may have to be further studied.
5. Conduct further studies on how graduates of this program are impacting their particular industries, and the benefits that these industries are receiving from having their members participate in this program.

6. Use standardized critical thinking instruments and leadership assessments to determine what level participants used their critical thinking skills and leadership abilities before and after the program. In the analytical section of questions, many of the participants, their spouses, and their associates believed that the participant already was a "critical thinker", they already had the skills necessary to identify and analyze complex issues.
7. Conduct a more detailed and systematic evaluation of this program. Evaluate a future class from beginning to end. A pre-test to determine the participants leadership roles, abilities, and overall knowledge could be given to the participants when they begin their first class in June. This test could be quantitative in nature and structured after many of the pre-tests used by other programs. A post-test could be given to the participants to see how much they really gained from the program. Using the pre- and post-test design, evaluators could better judge what leadership affects came from the program itself, or actually came from various other confounding factors.

Figure 1-1. Findings from triangulation. Overlapping circles represent themes common in more than one group.



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