

Widening the Circle of Leaders in Minnesota Communities

Extension education helps communities fill a leadership gap.



Emerging leaders share ideas with Darlene Macklin, executive director of the Worthington Chamber of Commerce (third from right) and Extension leadership educator Toby Spanier. They join the 2,000-plus Extension leadership graduates working to improve Minnesota communities.

Who will lead Minnesota communities in the 21st century? Mayors? City councils? Business leaders? Certainly. Do they have all the answers? Probably not. Can they lead alone? Definitely not.

Communities today grapple with a host of economic and social changes. They must do more with fewer resources. They must deal with conflicts and controversies. They must seize the opportunity technology offers—without sacrificing the personal touch.

Extension Research Fellow Ben Winchester conducted a study in 2010 showing that demand for leaders in the most rural areas of the state is nearly five times greater than in the most urban areas.

Organizations in these rural counties require one in 34 residents to serve in leadership positions, compared with one in every 143 residents in metropolitan areas.

To complicate things, finding people to lead is tougher today than in the past. Because people often live, work, play and go to school in different communities, their loyalties are divided. And their attention is divided, as they get information from a myriad of places besides the local newspaper.

Extension's leadership programs focus on what people need to lead in communities. In leadership lingo, the programs build "human capital" (individual skills and knowledge), as well as "social capital" (relationships and connections).

"Leadership and civic engagement

programs strive to give participants 'the three C's,'" says Mary Ann Hennen, director for Extension Leadership and Civic Engagement programs. "The confidence to step up to challenges, the competence to think and act in ways that pull people together and solve problems, and the connections to bring new resources, ideas, and perspectives to their communities."

Extension leadership programs are grounded in research conducted at the Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs and other respected institutions. LCE programs are continually updated to reflect the latest theories, as well as what's happening on the ground.

This research—and experience—show

that leadership programs are more successful in groups, or with cohorts, that meet over time. So Extension leadership programs convene cohorts that meet from six months to two years.

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“Small groups and teams help adults learn,” says Denise Trudeau Poskas, Extension leadership specialist. “Peer groups reinforce knowledge, attitude and behaviors, resulting in a better learning experience for participants.”

Extension leadership programs also focus on real-world application of principles taught in face-to-face and online training sessions. It’s significant, Hennen says, that Extension leadership programs are collaborative efforts—designed and implemented in partnership with community and regional groups that understand local problems, people and possibilities. Groups that sponsor leadership programs are thinking of their community’s future, investing in the kind



Reuben Bode, experienced leader and Minnesota Agriculture and Rural Leadership program alum, shares his experience with community leadership participant, Alie Hermanson.

of leadership they need to thrive.

A community leadership program called McLeod for Tomorrow is one example. “The program continues to be a priority during these challenging times for local governments because of its return on investment,” says Patrick Melvin, administrator in McLeod County. “Alumni of the McLeod for Tomorrow Leadership Program continue to work together even after the training ends.”

Evaluations show Leadership and Civic Engagement cohorts get results. In 2011, 70 percent of graduates increased their level of involvement in at least one community role. Focus groups of graduates yield stories of graduates ready and able to make a difference—whether they are new or experienced leaders.

Graduates of the West Central Leadership Academy (for emerging leaders), for example, report writing grants for their communities, and even running for office.

“This program has been the single, most significant value of my time in many years,”



Extension teaches newcomers in communities how they can contribute to the dialogue on important issues. Pictured: Vanessa Van Dam, emerging leadership participant.

says Monica Rose Anderson, a graduate of a Minnesota Agriculture and Rural Leadership cohort (for experienced leaders). “It will produce years of payback to my community, my state, and my nation.”

FOUR APPROACHES TO EXTENSION LEADERSHIP EDUCATION

EMERGING

Increase confidence and competence for those new to leadership—and encourage people to step up.

EXPERIENCED

Improve skills and expand outlook for elected, appointed and other leaders ready to build on what they know.

STRENGTHENING
Confidence
+
Competence
+
Connections
FOR COMMUNITIES

COMMUNITY

Increase local knowledge, build connections and strengthen skills for residents and leaders from across an area, county or region.

ORGANIZATIONAL

Strengthen leadership on community issues for organizations that work for the public good.