



# COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

for the 21st Century

## The Benefits of Community Leadership Development Education

by Kenneth Pigg

**C**ommunity leadership development education (CLDE) programs are frequently sponsored by universities, foundations, chambers of commerce and other organizations across America on an annual basis, often at substantial levels of expenditure of cash and other resources. Some estimates have this level of support at several million dollars annually. How is this support justified? This support has not been justified by a corresponding effort to document results, even for the individuals involved. Only a few studies have been published that have attempted to measure individual effects experienced by participants and almost no reports of effects beyond the individual level have been published. While individual sponsors may have required some sort of documentation of effects, it is rare that this documentation produces anything that reaches broader public attention. So, little is known about the general effects and purported benefits of these program interventions.

A recently completed research project on CLDE program effects in small rural sites supported by the USDA has provided some results that indicate what some of the benefits of these program efforts may be—to the communities in which they are organized, to the individuals who participate and to the sponsors who assist by providing some of the resources necessary to conduct the programs.<sup>1</sup> This short report summarizes these results.

<sup>1</sup> The Rural Community Effects of Leadership Development Education in the New Economy, research conducted by Kenneth Pigg, Univ. of Missouri with Dr. Stephen Gasteyer, Michigan State Univ., Dr. Kenneth Martin, Ohio State Univ. Dr. Kari Keating, Univ. of Illinois and Dr. Godwin Apaliyah with financial support from the USDA/National Research Initiative, Project No. 2006-35401-17560.

### Individual Benefits

Individuals from many backgrounds, usually relative newcomers to the community and often more female than male, participate in these programs. They come from many income and educational levels, some owning a local business, some working for a local institution or some just raising a family in town. Most seem highly committed to the community probably because they see themselves remaining in the community for some lengthy period of time, and they want to keep it viable. Their experience in these community-based programs that often last several months is empowering in several ways:<sup>1</sup>

- They learn important organizational and social skills that translate into the roles as leaders of various activities in the community.
- They learn about the community itself and how it “works” so that they can operate effectively in the political context as leaders.
- They develop a social network of individuals, many of whom will share mutual interests regarding the future of the community and a willingness to collaborate for change.

<sup>1</sup> The research analysis demonstrates that the CLDE experience has a statistically

significant effect, controlling for other factors such as participant demographics on program effects.

- They develop an appreciation for the value of diversity in attitudes, cultural backgrounds, skills and knowledge that differs from their own and an understanding of the value of inclusiveness.
- They increase their capacity to act in the civic life of their community through an increased commitment to the community. They understand that they possess “as much capacity as others in public office” to make good decisions that benefit the community.
- They overcome intimidation they may feel toward elected officials who are in positions of authority through direct interaction with them and communication about local issues.
- They increase their community involvement through more intense and more diverse organizational affiliations.
- They become more informed about local community issues and possible avenues for resolution.
- Long-term personal relationships are formed.
- (Where programs are offered for youth) In addition to the regular adult leadership development experience (e.g. city, county and state government), there is a sense of preparation for life after high school for the youth participants. Part of this preparation includes practicing interviewing skills, becoming informed about the complicated process attached to applications for colleges, tech schools, scholarships, etc., and giving students “professional” experiences in actual business settings to help the kids learn appropriate business relationship, ethics, and etiquette rules.
- Most importantly, they complete this learning experience with motivation to act, to “do something,” that will benefit their community in a public sense at some point in the future. They may not act immediately as many learn just how complicated civic life can be and just how much time and energy it will take to be successful. However, they know that when they are ready to act, they will know how to get things started and be successful in what they want to accomplish.



*“Most importantly, participants complete this learning experience with motivation to act, to ‘do something,’ that will benefit their community in a public sense at some point in the future.”*

### Community Benefits

Many of these CLDE programs are initiated because existing community leaders recognize they have a deficit in the “leadership pool” in their community. They may notice that there are not people running for local office at election time or willing to be appointed to local boards and commissions. Organizations may be complaining that they cannot find capable board members to give leadership to their organizations. Citizens may be complaining about the quality of leadership and the lack of progress being made to improve the community or sectors of it. For whatever the reason, improved leadership is often seen as one solution to the problem, and efforts to build local leadership capacity are introduced. Do CLDE programs produce desired effects? The results of this research answer the question, at least partially.

- CLDE participants frequently become directly involved as leaders of community organizations,<sup>2</sup> bringing greater understanding of leadership requirements to organizational functions.
- CLDE participants frequently depart the program and find immediate needs that can be addressed by collective action; those actions are joined by others who have been CLDE participants and other leaders in the community until sufficient resources are mobilized and a community activity or event is successfully implemented.
- CLDE participants are successful in forming partnerships with local government officials whenever possible (and necessary) in order to get things accomplished instead of adopting

<sup>2</sup> CLDE program enrollments average about 20 participants in each group or class.



confrontational tactics unless absolutely necessary.

- It is estimated that about thirty percent of CLDE participants become active in civic affairs within two or three years of their program participation; other participants may wait longer and some may never become engaged or may move from the community.
- Depending on the location, a small number of CLDE participants may run for elected office (and win), while others are content with other civic leadership roles.
- Our research identified over 220 individual projects or activities carried out in 20 sites within 3 years following the CLDE program (an average of 11 per site in locations where the population ranged from about 3,000 to 18,000 persons in the mid-2000s<sup>3</sup>).
- Program sponsors in some communities report that they share their participant lists with organizational leaders in the community who then recruit program participants to serve on their boards of directors.<sup>4</sup>
- Participants develop a greater knowledge of the history of the community. I have always felt that our past greatly informs who we are as a community. Learning about the history of a local economy gives “newcomers,” those not born and raised in that particular area, a sense of the community that puts them on more of a level playing field, even though the learning about the community did not occur during their childhood and adolescence. Also, the

<sup>3</sup> No estimate of the economic value of these activities was attempted due to a lack of research resources.

<sup>4</sup> This was a standard practice in many urban communities studied by Carl Moore in his 1984 book *A Colorful Quilt*, Indianapolis, IN: National Association for Community Leadership.

historical perspective refreshes important aspects of our past for those who did grow up in the area. The sense of shared community identity is helpful in the interweaving of the new threads (newcomers) into the tapestry of those who were raised there.

- Similar to relationship building, but on a macro level, seems to be a certain fraternal relationship between all CLDE graduates regardless of when they participated. It represents a shared experience across the years.<sup>5</sup>
- Overall, these participants contribute to enhancing the community’s civic infrastructure with a greater appreciation for its diversity and what that offers, a greater appreciation for generalized community benefits as opposed to private benefits and an appreciation for recognizing that government is not the solution to every problem.

## Benefits to Sponsors

CLDE sponsors consist of those organizations that organize and offer these programs as well as organizations that provide financial resources in support of the program and its participants. Some of these resources sponsor the participation of individuals who are applicants to the program while some are general in nature. The organizations that organize the programs often provide considerable resources in-kind and recruit similar resources from other organizations and institutions in the area like higher education institutions, local and state government health care providers, and so forth.

Sponsors may also include foundations from outside the community that often provide financial resources as well as program materials from which the program design is developed and implemented. Sponsors such as this may have a specific outcome in mind when their support is offered. Local sponsors often are less clear about specific outcomes that are desired and, instead, may simply endorse the usefulness of CLDE programs to the general benefit of the community.

- Employees and citizens who are better informed about community issues

<sup>5</sup> Assumes the program is offered on a continuing basis over a long period of time.

- Employees and citizens who have strengthened or obtained leadership skills
- Employees and citizens who are more involved in community organizations, etc.
- Employees and citizens that run for elected office and serve on boards and committees
- Employees and citizens that represent their employers when doing all of the above
- Employees with more capacity to make solid decisions

Extension (specifically):

- Citizens and potential community decision makers who are well educated about their community and the issues it faces
- Well-informed members of the community regarding the local economy, local government, how decisions are made and how organizations and individuals work effectively together
- Citizens who will understand and likely support bond issues that are intended to benefit the community broadly
- More effective Extension Council members

## A Cautionary Note

It is obvious that community leadership development efforts can be perceived as a challenge to the existing power structure in the community—the “good ol’ boys/girls” organization that we know still exists in many places. If the program efforts are perceived this way, they may be undermined and forced to discontinue as undesirable. However, many Extension and Chamber staff members that have been interviewed in the conduct of this and related research report that this situation can be effectively managed.

Existing leaders need to be persuaded that these programs are not established to displace the existing leadership, but to assist them with those things that they already recognize need to be done. Often, these leaders recognize the need, but they do not have the time, energy or resources to address those needs. The leaders should understand that they can claim some credit if they are seen as public supporters of the program, a win-win scenario. In addition, helping existing leaders recognize that there needs to be a team of individuals prepared to take their places eventually can also be an effective argument to diffuse any discomfort. Existing leaders should have the long-term future benefit of the community in mind. If they do not, then some may question whether or not they really are part of the existing leadership group or simply an obstacle to necessary change. Few want to be publicly labeled an obstacle (even if it is not done by the media).

Show the doubters your curriculum. Invite them to be part of the learning process as “teachers” sharing information about how the community works from their standpoint. Get them invested in the outcome, and they are more likely to be supporters—or, at least, not nay-sayers—when it comes time to assess the value of the work being done and the results being produced.

In our research, we ask participants of these programs whether it was worth their investment of time and money and whether it was worth the investment of the sponsors. In both cases, more than 95% of the respondents indicated “yes.” This is a very strong endorsement for CLDE program efforts by any sponsor, even with the very real commitment of resources that these programs require to be successful.

*CLDE participants contribute to enhancing the community’s civic infrastructure with a greater appreciation for its diversity and recognizing that government is not the solution to every problem.*