Community Leadership Development: Preliminary Steps to a General Theory

by Kenneth Pigg

To fully complete a general theory of community leadership and understand how it can best be fostered by interventions such as an educational program, we need to think about how such program efforts affect individuals and, subsequently, how those effects may be extended to produce community effects. For example, evaluations of community leadership development education (CLDE) programs often focus on what skills participants may have learned, such as how to manage a group meeting. How does that skill carry over into producing a community effect? Clearly there would be several intermediate things necessary to produce such an effect, such as a convening of a group with a shared purpose, the mobilization of resources necessary to accomplish this purpose, and the planning and implementation of an activity and its outcome. It is also clear that, while this specific skill measured might be very helpful, there are many other "variables" that would have to be included in reaching the final outcome. Any general theory of leadership must consider the link between the individual-level effects and the community effects.[1]

Recent research that I have been conducting has demonstrated this principle and has produced a preliminary model for others to consider and examine critically, both in theory and practice.[2] The specific elements of this theory are fully described in a set of short publications in this series.

This publication provides a general overview of the research results in the broadest form to capture an overall picture of how CLDE works to produce community effects. This theory has been produced by empirical work, but it is supported by a broad literature from several disciplinary fields which are only briefly touched upon later. (It should be noted that the research design was organized to demonstrate that the CLDE programs made a difference in the individual outcomes compared to groups of comparison sites where there were no CLDE programs in operation.)

Civic Engagement: The Lynchpin Variable

In order for citizens to make changes in their communities, they have to get engaged in community activities. This involves getting engaged in the "public sphere," or the civil society, that is the community field. This involvement often involves knowing about community politics and how they work. Being engaged in civic activity means being able to work with others on a project that benefits the community rather than private interests. Being civically engaged means being able to communicate to others in the community how what you want to do will provide material benefits to the community, perhaps linking what you want to do with other activities being carried out or planned at the same time. Being civically engaged may also mean developing partnerships with local officials or the leaders of community organizations that control resources you need to make your project successful. Someone who is engaged in civic activity can be motivated by lots of things, but is nearly always motivated by an interest in the long-term general well-being of the community.

1 A similar concern exists for researchers in the formal organizational field who are dealing with such multilevel issues (see, for example, Goethals, G.R. & Sorenson, G.L.J. 2006. The Quest for a General Theory of Leadership. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.).

2 This research has been conducted along with Dr. Stephen Gasteyer, Michigan State Univ. and Dr. Kenneth Martin, Ohio State Univ. with financial support from the University of Missouri and the USDA/National Research Initiative, Project No. 2006-35401-17560.

The research demonstrates that those who score highly on an index of civic engagement as an outcome of a CLDE experience make a significant impact on their community. An appropriate CLDE design supports the development of an increased capacity for civic engagement in individual participants. The elements of the CLDE experience that contribute to this increased capacity are important.

Increasing Individual Capacity

In the broadest terms, this increased capacity is the result of a CLDE design that empowers participants. This empowerment element is composed of several variables. In order to be empowered, participants must experience an increase in their **Personal Skills and Efficacy** as well as an increase in their **Community Knowledge**. These two variables are measured using multi-indicator indexes that are very reliable and have proven to be very stable in multiple settings for community-based CLDE programs.

Personal Skills and Efficacy involves some of the usual skills considered essential for leaders such as managing meetings, dealing with conflict and communicating clearly. Being confident in exercising these types of skills contributes to an increased sense of personal efficacy or a psychological confidence in performing as a leader whenever appropriate.

An increase in Community Knowledge is also important because many who are invited to participate in these CLDE programs are often relative newcomers to the community and do not know "how the community works." This knowledge may include a bit about the history of the community, but it also includes gaining a more thorough understanding of the various sectors or "fields" of the community such as education, health care, recreation, social services, environmental conditions, the local economic structure, local government operations, legal systems and so forth. In learning about these sectors, CLDE participants get to personally know the individuals who occupy the formal leadership roles, their personalities and values, the statutory authorities under which they may operate, their future plans and how they view their relationship to the larger community. This knowledge becomes extremely important to CLDE participants when they decide how they will become engaged in the civic life of the community.

Besides these empowerment factors, there are two other factors that result from CLDE experiences: **Community Commitment** and **Shared Vision and Purpose**. Without a commitment to the community and its future, we should not expect citizens to be engaged in civic life. It is not clear just what elements of CLDE curriculum work to increase this commitment, but the index scores on this variable are
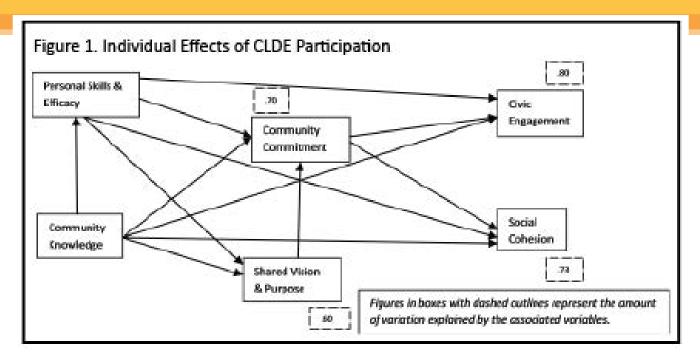
clearly increased. While this commitment may be related to external factors such as a person's financial investment in the community or the planned length of time he or she will living there, increasing commitment may also be a social effect of being motivated by other participants who demonstrate a high degree of commitment.

Community Commitment appears to play an important central role in channeling a portion of the effects of Community Knowledge and Personal Skills and Efficacy to increase Civic Engagement as well as Shared Vision and Purpose. CLDE programs tackle the development of Shared Vision and Purpose in a number of ways. Some programs spend time with participants working on the development of a vision statement to adopt as their collective view for the future of the community. Other programs spend time discussing the importance of developing such a vision statement or, at least, a common sense of purpose and how that can be accomplished in the community. Participants leave the program with an increased appreciation for the vision and purpose of the future of the community than what they had when the CLDE program began. This, too, may have emerged from interactions with other participants.

Together, jointly and independently, these four variables explain 80 percent of the variation in the index of civic engagement as measured in this research (Figure 1). It should be noted that the research model produced is not a causal model.[3] Nevertheless, this model represents a good starting point for future work and for systematically thinking about what we are doing in the practice of leadership development. Further, this model demonstrates that the effects of CLDE programs can be viewed as a "pattern" or a structure of effects that are interrelated and reinforcing (if not causal). These effects should not be considered apart from each other if the civic engagement outcome is the desired result for the program participants. Since it is this general theory's hypothesis that civic engagement is the key element that links individuals to community change, considering ways to enhance the relationship of these variables in the CLDE design is very important.

It is also worth noting that another of the outcome variables for individual participants is an increased capacity for building **Social Cohesion** in the community. Participants gain an appreciation for diversity and how to build consensus, especially important since many communities face growing cultural diversity issues. It is affected by the same variables as civic engagement although these variables explain a slightly smaller amount of the total variance in this index.

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3 A structural equation model was used for this analysis which produces a path analysis indicating how each variable may be related to other variables being considered with one variable being designated the dependent variable for explanation. This designation is determined by the researcher.

Figure 1. Individual Effects of CLDE Participation

Personal Skills & Efficacy

Community Commitment
.70

Civic Engagement
.80

Community Knowledge

Shared Vision & Purpose
.60

Social Cohesion
.73

Figures in boxes with dashed outlines represent the amount of variation explained by the associated variables.

Civic Engagement Produces Community Effects

The research design also examined how the participants put their new capacity to work in community development activities. To do this, the researchers conducted focus groups among key informants in the research sites to identify activities carried out in the community as well as the leaders in those activities. Telephone interviews were then conducted with those leaders in each activity to learn as much as possible about their experience. The details of these interviews were recorded in a checklist of important descriptive indicators of community activity that the research team had previously identified. The interviewee information was cross-checked to increase reliability in the coding. Several observations about this aspect of the research should be noted before considering the results.

First, in order to analyze the effects of civic engagement at the community level, it was necessary to use the mean score for all the participants on the index of civic engagement. This meant that only 20 values for civic engagement were available to use in the analysis of over 200 individual community activities and events we examined in which CLDE participants had been leaders.[4] Obviously, this severely restricted the degree of variation available in the analysis of the data.

Second, the research design used the Community Capitals Framework (CCF) as a method of organizing the information about each community activity.[5] So, the checklist used to record pertinent characteristics of the community activities conducted by the CLDE participants was based on what could be constructed from literature reviews regarding relevant and appropriate indicators for each of the community capitals. In the end, the results revealed that the measure of these capitals was not very robust with variation among the indicators being very small. Further, it was often difficult to determine whether or not a specific indicator was actually present based on the interviews conducted and the way in which interviewees had described what had been done in the community. Further, it was noted that the CCF framework likely left out some possible important factors that could also have been considered, such as the direct economic value of an activity completed in the community. So, the variation in the summative indexes constructed for each of the community capitals was small, and an effort to determine the dimensionality of each of the indices constructed from the sets of CCF indicators resulted in at least two or three separate factors or components to each set of indicators meaning that the indexes were not unidimensional.
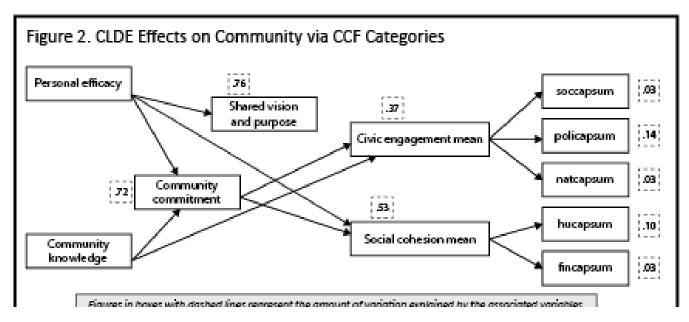
Despite these limitations, the research generated a resulting model that demonstrated that, in fact, civic engagement was a significant factor in explaining the variation in all but two of the CCF indexes (Figure 2). The amount of variation

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4 Four sites were dropped from this phase of the study due to lack of access available to the researchers in these sites.

5 Flora, C., Flora, J. & Fey, S. 2004. Rural Communities: Legacy and Change, 2nd Ed. Boulder, CO. Westview Press.

typically explained was generally small (less than 10 percent in some cases) since the variation of both independent and dependent variables was restricted, but it was significant despite the small number of cases. While not as conclusive as desired, this result is suggestive that the research was likely on a productive track and, with some improvements, could produce more robust results. This model also shows how social cohesion plays a somewhat different role in the generation of community activity with a focus on efforts to (especially) increase human and financial capital.

Enormous amounts of resources have been committed over the past few decades to support community leadership development with only limited evidence of its effects on individuals. Yet, there is a continuing belief that creating more capacity for effective leadership among community residents who desire to be more actively involved in their communities will produce desired changes and material benefits. The research with which I have been involved over the past five years has produced a very preliminary understanding of how these educational programs may, in fact, be working to produce both individual and

Figure 2. CLDE Effects on Community via CCF Categories

Figures in boxes with dashed lines represent the amount of variation explained by the associated variables.

There are some interesting relationships to be considered in this model. Note that Shared Vision and Purpose no longer seems to play any role in these activities. No explanation is immediately available from our data. Personal Skills and Efficacy plays a direct role in the Social Cohesion portion of the model, and it plays an indirect role in the Civic Engagement portion. Community Commitment plays a central role in the overall model no matter which specific path is examined. Community Knowledge plays a direct role in the Civic Engagement portion and an indirect role in the Social Cohesion portion of the model. Lastly, our analysis shows that there is almost no effect whatsoever for the personal characteristics of the participants on the outcomes, either individually or at the community level as shown in these abridged models.

community effects. The research shows how the individual effects may form a patterned, rather than random, effect with a focus on civic engagement and social cohesion. Civic engagement is a variable that speaks to the political role of individual citizens in the process of community change. Social cohesion is a variable that represents a sense of community attachment and commitment to inclusiveness in community activities. Both variables are important features of democratic societies and represent important strengths for small communities to maintain for future viability. Much work remains to be done, and the research on which these models are built is, as noted, very preliminary. However, they offer some of the first hard evidence that those engaged in the hard work of community leadership development are generally on the right track.