

## Building Agricultural Leadership through Policy Explorations

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### **Introduction/Need for Idea**

Agricultural leadership programs are not a new concept with many states throughout the country having long standing programs designed to teach leadership to agricultural professionals. The North Carolina Agricultural Leadership Development Program is a two-year program designed to develop and promote personal and civic leadership skills in North Carolina farmers, agribusiness professionals, and other agriculturalists. This program consists of seven seminars throughout North Carolina, a legislative study tour to Washington, D.C., a United States domestic study tour, and an international study tour. The seminars and tours are focused on strengthening core competencies in personal leadership, understanding how to engage productively in civic leadership, and understanding the diversity of agriculture and its place in the United States and global economy.

To build effective community, state, and national leaders, an in-depth understanding of the legislative process is an important component emphasized throughout the ALDP program. There is a need to understand the importance of policy making and crisis management in all organizations with leaders capable of making adaptive policy changes (Janie, 1989). To assist in teaching about policy, instructors should use those instructional strategies that align with the policy making process such as public conversations, study circles, collaborative processes, and alternative dispute resolutions (Bingham, Nabatchi, & O'Leary, 2005). Many of the participants in this cohort are involved in local boards and associations, but few are involved beyond the local level. Griffin and Thurber (2015) found that many individuals recognize the need to advocate for policy changes but lack the knowledge to organize and participate in policy efforts. With a large majority expressing an interest in serving as officers and board members on organizations beyond the local level such as commodity associations, boards of education, and politics at the state level in the future, curriculum on the legislative process and policy making are essential to meet the needs of ALDP participants. In addition to an understanding of the legislative process and policy making, leadership and networking are also emphasized since they too are key components in the legislative process (Natesan & Marathe, 2014).

### **How It Works**

Prior to the third session, ALDP participants interviewed five individuals seeking opinions on current agricultural issues. During the third session, the legislative and policy making process are the main topics with guest speakers, lobbyists, and agricultural leaders supplementing the instruction and explaining their role in policy. Following these workshops, participants placed their top five issues on notecards before working together as a large group to combine the notecards into categories. This process left eleven topics that were then discussed and voted upon, leaving six topics for the agricultural issue papers presented in Washington, D.C. during the policy tour.

During the two months following the session, participants worked together as a group to research their topic and develop a white paper. Participants were randomly assigned to the following topics: Farmland Loss, Harnessing Efficiency and Technology to Meet Food and Fiber Demand, Securing our Future through Career and Technical Education, Affordable and Quality Insurance for Farmers and Small Business Owners, Favorable Trade Policies for (State), and Establishing and Maintaining a Reliable and Cost Effective Guest Working Program. Participants were also responsible for scheduling appointments with their congressional leaders

and staffers prior to visiting Washington. The papers were submitted and combined into a booklet that participants then distributed during their congressional meetings.

### **Results to Date/Implications**

After the Washington study tour, participants completed a reflection about their policy experience. The leadership team uses reflections and evaluations as a method to seek feedback on the participant's experiences. We then use that feedback to improve future programs and develop curriculum that will continue to meet the needs of the program. Because of the random group assignments, some of the participants discussed gaining knowledge about a topic that at first may have been unfamiliar. Participants were also asked to share what leadership competencies were reinforced through this experience. The following were categories stated by more than half of the participants: communication, delegation, cohesion, open-mindedness, and sharing of a common goal. On the increase in policy making and legislative process question with a scale of one to five (one being no increase in knowledge and 5 being a significant increase in knowledge), the mean was a 4.28 affirming the effectiveness of this policy project.

This is the second year participants have developed and presented an agricultural white paper in Washington. This experience allows participants to engage in the sharing of opinions, researching an issue, developing a white paper, and then effectively communicating an agricultural issue with their congressional leaders. Participants shared that they feel equipped with the knowledge and skills to advocate within their local community as well as at the state and national level. During their congressional meetings, the congressional leaders and staffers also offer feedback to the participants which is valued. Members of the last cohort continuously report, they are more comfortable calling their representatives to share opinions and working within their organizations to influence policy. As a leadership program, this policy seminar has proved beneficial to past and current participants.

### **Future Plans/Advice to Others**

One of the issues that arose with the previous cohort was lack of participation from group members. This year group sizes were decreased to five per issue team with three check-ins from the program leaders in between sessions. The check-ins helped with the accountability of group members and answered questions that were needed for progress. Specific instructions and guidelines were also given to the groups to assist with developing their paper. However, we encouraged creativity with many groups choosing to use a variety of infographics, statistics, and creative handouts compared to a traditional white paper.

The program's leadership team has also considered allowing group members to choose their groups which is something we may try in the next cohort. For their second project that takes place during the second year of the program, participants are allowed to choose their practicum so we believe that the random assignment for one project is a useful skill in building leadership and research skills. There may be times where leaders are a part of a project that is unfamiliar which allows the leaders to seek input from those individuals who are more knowledgeable.

### **Costs/Resources Needed**

The cost for the entire two year program is supported by an endowment and the participant's fee of \$1,600. When considering the total cost, \$1,600 (per participant) covers their study tour in Washington including travel, hotel, and meals. The cost of the agricultural issues booklet is approximately \$200 for 100 copies that are also distributed to stakeholders in addition to the congressional offices.

## References

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