

Accomplishments of North Carolina Agricultural Leadership Program Participants

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Introduction

As agriculture continues to change and meet the growing demands of society, agricultural leaders are needed to help direct commodity organizations, influence agricultural policy, and lead in their communities. The North Carolina Tobacco Trust Fund Commission Agricultural Leadership Development Program is a two-year program designed to develop personal and civic leadership skills among North Carolina agriculturalists. Originally started in 1984 for tobacco farmers, this program evolved to include all sectors of agriculture in 2005. Today, the program is proud to boast over 250 alumni with average cohort sizes of thirty participants. Participants attend seminars held throughout the state that focus on leadership competencies and the diversity of North Carolina agriculture, a Washington, D.C. policy tour, a domestic study tour, and an international experience. Program leaders hope that these seminars and experiences assist participants in developing both their personal and civic leadership skills that will enable them to lead in their organizations and communities. While evaluations are given after each session/experience, a more in-depth evaluation was conducted to gain an understanding of the specific accomplishments in the participant's personal and professional life that they attributed to the program.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

Leadership programs should be designed to provide participants with skill development that will allow them to lead and problem solve within their communities and organizations (Langone, 1992). Birkenholz (1999) stated that effective adult learning is an individual process where motivation combined with a variety of realistic experiences provides adults with the opportunity to gain knowledge that will benefit them in their own lives. Adults choose to learn and must see the benefits of learning the curriculum. Learning opportunities should provide hands-on skill development while incorporating problem-solving in real-world contexts and utilizing a variety of instructional methods (Birkenholz, 1999). Specifically, for agricultural leadership programs, the experiences and instruction should be agricultural focused. Evaluations of leadership programs should be conducted periodically to provide insight for improving future programs and exploring the impacts of the program at the various levels (Gargani & Donaldson, 2011; Kaufman, Rateau, Carter, & Strickland, 2012).

Methodology

An in-depth evaluation was developed by program leaders with input from program stakeholders and a literature review of previous agricultural leadership program evaluations. For this part of the evaluation, open-ended questions focused on personal and professional accomplishments were developed and distributed to participants through an online survey. Follow-up emails were sent after two weeks and four weeks. As mentioned earlier, the program consists of cohorts that were primarily tobacco farmers and cohorts that were a mix of agricultural professionals. Hoping to gain more insight on how to continue to improve the program and the impacts of the current program, only the four cohorts that are a mix of agricultural professionals were surveyed. Their responses to the open-ended questions were coded using axial coding methods to create categorical organization.

Results/Findings

The greatest professional accomplishments in order of reference included: job promotion, public speaking engagements, networking within the agricultural industry, serving on boards, making better business decisions, having crucial conversations, and advocating for agricultural issues. One participant mentioned “I was in the 40 under 40 for Greenhouse Production and featured in a Forbes article for women in Horticulture. The program assisted me in becoming a stronger manager and leader.” Personally, the greatest accomplishments noted an increased prioritization of their families, better communication skills, and devoted community membership. One alum stated “I am a better father and husband because of the program. I learned how I operate, how I fight, and how I argue, all of which impact others. The program saved my marriage.” Another participant stated that within his cohort, he was the shyest and terribly afraid of talking in front of any size group. Thanks to the program, he now is the chair of the North Carolina Farm Bureau Young Farmers and Ranchers and has served on several national committees. He credits the program with providing him with training that alleviated his stage fright and helped him better communicate his thoughts.

Conclusions

Evaluations are a critical component of leadership programs as we strive to build leaders that not only lead in North Carolina agriculture but also lead in their families and careers. Professionally, many of the accomplishments pertained to the “communication” dynamic of the program. Effective leaders must be great communicators and the results and findings address this important component. Personally, participants mentioned prioritization of their family and many of the responses discussed better communication within their homes and families in the responses. As program leaders strive to develop the curriculum and experiences, opportunities to further hone their communication skills should be a continued focus. Communication is an area that is crucial in both personal and professional settings. The travel experiences in all settings allow for a greater understanding of agriculture on the local, state, national, and international levels. These experiences provide critical agricultural knowledge while allowing participants the opportunity to network with other leaders in the agricultural community.

Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession

Agriculture is currently facing many challenges and one of the greatest challenges is the lack of agricultural awareness among society. Agricultural leaders are needed that can effectively communicate their stories and vision while ensuring Americans that they are utilizing the best environmental and animal welfare practices. Agricultural leadership programs should design their programs around state needs that will help promote agriculture within their state. While most of the leadership programs are more “professionally” focused, incorporating opportunities to also address family components will provide a more well-rounded leader. With many farming operations being family-owned, individuals must navigate family dynamics and maintaining a successful business. Agricultural educators must seek to develop programs that are meeting the needs of the cohort participants.

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