

**Evaluating Long-Term Outcomes of an Agriculture and Natural Resources Leadership
Development Program**

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Introduction/need for research

Rural and agricultural leadership development programs have existed since the Kellogg Farmers Study Program was established in 1965 (W.K. Kellogg, 2000). Despite having over a half century of history, research documenting program impacts and outcomes is rather limited. The Kellogg Foundation evaluated 28 programs in 2000, providing a general profile description as well as impacts of the programs. They noted that agricultural LDPs were well positioned to continue developing industry leaders. In their 2016 evaluation of Cooperative Extension System administered LDPs, Lamm et al. noted increasing pressure on program directors to rigorously evaluate their programs and provide evidence of worth but acknowledged that comprehensive evaluation can be challenging. None the less, they recommended robust evaluations to ensure impactful ANR LDPs. To that end, this research is part of a larger, longitudinal study aimed at evaluating the outcomes and impacts of the Wedgworth Leadership Institute (WLI).

Conceptual or theoretical framework

Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2016) recommend evaluating training programs to improve them and demonstrate their value, but also to “maximize transfer of learning to behavior” (p. 5). Participants should implement what they learned, resulting in measurable outcomes. The Kirkpatrick model (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016) includes four levels: reaction, learning, behavior, and results. Reaction evaluates how engaging and relevant the training is to participants. Level two determines the degree to which participants acquired the intended knowledge and skills. Behavior is the degree to which participants apply what they learned, while results determine the degree to which the intended program outcomes were achieved.

Methodology

This evaluation research sought to illuminate long-term outcomes and impacts of WLI. WLI was established in 1989 at the University of Florida, with the intent to “develop and refine the leadership capabilities of leaders who, in turn, will be prepared to become increasingly involved in policy formation” (WLI, mission, para. 1). The program involves 12 seminars, incorporating approximately 55 days of instruction delivered over nearly two years. Each class includes approximately 30 participants chosen from a competitive selection process. We explored experiences and perceptions of WLI alumni five and ten years after completing the program. Specific research objectives were 1) describe WLI alumni experiences during and after their participation, and 2) determine participants’ perceptions of the WLI. Two focus groups were conducted, one with five-year alumni and one with ten-year alumni. Two researchers facilitated the conversations simultaneously, using a moderator’s guide. The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. Two researchers reviewed and analyzed the transcripts separately, then compared their analyses, reconciled codes, and developed themes.

Results/findings

Theme 1: Behavior change credited to WLI. Theme one included two sub-themes: using their voice and taking on leadership roles. Participants noted an increased frequency of “using their voice” to lead in various spaces. Additionally, participants listed multiple leadership roles they had taken on since their completion of WLI, specifically crediting the program. These roles were in agriculture organizations, community governance, and others.

I took on the role of a local chapter [organization] president after going through the program, something that I very adamantly and openly said I would not do because I did not like to be the leader... I don't think I would've done it otherwise. (Class A member)

Theme 2: Expanded network and strengthened relationships. The second theme contained three sub-themes: personal friendships and support, professional network, and obligation by association. Participants gained a great deal from the people they met as a result of the program. There was a strong sense of friendship among classmates, demonstrated by birthday messages, hugs at alumni events, and genuine care for each other. Participants also described the professional network they had acquired, including classmates, WLI alumni from other classes, as well as speakers and those who facilitated learning for the program. A Class B member said, "...it's having that network of people that help you navigate the difficulties of agriculture, and for me, that's one of the biggest, it's been the biggest benefit I got from the program". While the first two subthemes illustrate benefits participants gained in the form of a network, the third theme illustrates expectations participants felt as a result of being part of the WLI network. They are called upon for various activities as a direct result of being a WLI alum.

Theme 3: Broadened perspectives. Theme three emerged as participants spoke about being able to see things differently, between varying commodities, across the agriculture industry holistically, and within their larger communities. Participants credited WLI for their ability to approach issues in more complex ways, and to see others' perspectives. A Class A member noted "It opens up your periphery and looking at Florida, Florida's impact in the nation, and then throughout the world and how do these industries work together to make Florida stronger."

Theme 4: Enhanced awareness of self and others. In the final theme, participants expressed that WLI enhanced their self-awareness, as well as their understanding of and how to work with diverse people. One Class B participant recalled that the program "helped you identify different personalities and leadership styles, that sticks with me."

Conclusions

Kirkpatrick's levels of evaluation can be identified in the four themes that emerged from the focus groups. Participants spoke positively about the program, indicating satisfaction with their experience, even five and ten years after it concluded. The themes illustrate both learning and behavior, as participants credited WLI for specific skills they learned and behaviors they adopted. Importantly, some participants were able to articulate specific results their program participation had precipitated, that impacted their organization, commodity, or industry.

Implications/recommendations/impact

Our evaluation results suggest that WLI is effective. Not only are participants learning, but they are also implementing their learning through behavior that, in turn, impacts the ANR industry. Notably, WLI's mission is to increase leaders' contribution to policy formation, which appeared tangentially but not directly in the data. We recommend WLI continue to provide leader development and consider enhancing components that help leaders engage more directly in policy formation. Further, we recommend continued evaluation of this program and like programs to ensure ANR LDPs are impactful.

References

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