

Nurturing Success Amid Challenges: Training Future Leaders in Rural Communities

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Introduction/Need for Research

Growing up in a rural community offers a distinctive way of life characterized by open spaces, close-knit relationships, and a strong connection to agriculture (Etuk et al., 2013). In rural communities of North Carolina, there is a need to train and develop future leaders in agricultural education and extension. Because North Carolina's rural communities heavily rely on agriculture as a significant economic driver (NCSU - CALS, 2023). However, these communities face various challenges, including shifting demographics, limited resources, and the need for innovative approaches to sustain the agricultural sector (Quaicoe et al., 2023). The agricultural sector in North Carolina requires effective leaders who can tackle complex issues, drive innovation, and engage with diverse stakeholders. Agricultural leadership education acknowledges this and has shifted from working primarily with rural adolescents to teaching undergraduate and graduate students to empower the community and bring about change (Velez et al., 2014). As Kaufman et al. (2010) noted, a leadership development program should focus on three areas: knowledge of the changing industry, relationship building across industry sectors, and practical, transferable skill development. Agricultural leadership development programs like the Rurally Engaged Agricultural Leaders (REAL) program have responded to this need by identifying opportunities for students interested in working with rural communities to gain leadership experiences to contribute to their growth and development. However, El-Amin (2022) advises a pressing need to evaluate and enhance the training of future agricultural education and extension leaders within this context to ameliorate the challenges to prepare leaders.

Conceptual/ Theoretical Framework

The team leadership framework focuses on collective community action that unites and empowers individuals to address complex problems, collaborate with others, and generate innovative solutions (Kelsey & Wall, 2003). By developing individual leadership skills and promoting effective group processes, team leadership can facilitate community development and enhance the resilience of rural communities while reducing threatening situations and promoting shared knowledge and increased communication (Kelsey & Wall, 2003; Pomrenke, 1989).

Methodology

This study utilized data collected from the 2023-2024 REAL program participants cohort prior to the start of the program. The REAL program aims to create a cohort of undergraduate students from rural areas to develop leadership potential, build professional networks, and engage with local and state Extension faculty and policy makers. Participants were asked two open-ended questions: 1) What did you enjoy most about growing up in a rural community? and 2) What were some of the challenges that you saw your rural community face? Participants were encouraged to provide detailed responses based on their personal experiences. We obtained 11 responses (100% response rate), and the data was analyzed qualitatively to identify common themes and patterns that would assist in directing the future sessions of the REAL program.

Results/Findings

Question one yielded three major themes. The first theme, sense of community, was highlighted by participants mentioning the small-town feel, easy connections with people, and everyone knowing you. Theme two, peaceful environment, was valued by participants due to a lack traffic, crime, and the feeling of contentment. One participant stated “I constantly feel overwhelmed here Raleigh because of the traffic and busy lifestyle. It makes me miss home.” Lastly, nature and agriculture emerged as the final theme. Participants enjoyed being surrounded by agriculture

and being in green open spaces daily. Three major themes emerged from the second question. The first theme, lack of resources and services, was emphasized by participants noting a limited access to resources, lack of credible courses at the high school level, availability and cost of veterinary services, and limited access to nearby resources like Wi-Fi. One participant stated being worried about getting into NC State because their friends in urban areas had access to advanced placement courses and their school only offered a select few. Another participant shared her desire to become a veterinarian was heavily impacted by her communities need for a veterinarian. The second theme that emerged was related to urbanization and development. As participants elaborated on urban sprawl that resulted in development on farmland and the rapid influx of residents leading to the loss of family farms. One participant shared “I feel like my community culture that I knew is no longer there.” Lastly, theme three focused on agricultural industry challenges. Participants shared that they or their communities had been impacted by commodity markets, regulatory requirements, changing demographics, agricultural illiteracy, natural resource depletion, and economic survival which yielded concerns related to the livelihoods of family and friends.

Conclusions

The themes that emerged support Horlings and Marsden (2010), who emphasized the significance of community and social capital in rural leadership development. All of the participants were quick to highlight the strong sense of community they felt “back home” and they social capital of that community was valuable to them. Rural areas often have strong community bonds, and leadership programs can capitalize on these relationships to foster collaboration and community-based leadership. The connection to nature and agriculture is a prevalent theme in rural life and is consistent with Kaufman et al. (2010), who highlighted the importance of agricultural knowledge and appreciation in rural leadership programs. Participants' exposure to agricultural practices can be a strong foundation for leadership roles in agriculture and rural development. While the participants were new to each other their commonality embraced a trust and allowed them to take a “risk” of opening up for the betterment of their communities. Further, the challenges reflected the disparities in resource distribution between rural and urban areas. Leaders are often trained to balance preserving rural identity and fostering sustainable development (Horlings & Padt, 2013). Yet equipping future leaders with knowledge and skills related to the agricultural sector is essential to addressing these industry-specific challenges. The results suggest certain benefits and challenges associated with growing up in a rural area which emphasize the necessity of designing programs with experiential learning opportunities that allow rural students to connect with one another.

Implications/Recommendations/Impact

Building a sense of safety, confidence, and community is essential to a leadership development program that prepares leaders to take on rural communities' unique opportunities and challenges. These programs are essential to maintaining the wealth and vibrancy of rural communities because they develop leaders who recognize and appreciate the advantages of living in a rural area. By including the challenges that rural students face in leadership programs, students can unite and see that they have a greater voice in numbers. This inspires students to take the initiative and become proactive community advocates and issue solvers, working on projects that tackle resource scarcity, advance sustainable development, and support the agriculture industry. Agricultural leadership programs focusing on rural areas enable students to be successful change agents in their rural communities.

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