

# **Long-term Evaluation of “Leadership in Your Community Conferences”**

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## **Introduction**

The need for effective leadership for groups, organizations, and communities appears to be universally supported. Academic disciplines have questioned and explored what traits and experiences make a leader and what constitutes effective leadership (Daugherty & Williams, 1997). Rohs (1988) emphasized the importance of leadership development, noting the significant need in rural communities. The challenge is to create leadership development opportunities that meet the needs of emerging community leaders and are readily accessible to a diverse group.

For this study, emerging leaders were defined as persons in the early stages of developing their leadership abilities, including those who had not yet emerged as recognized leaders on a substantive level. Informal needs assessments conducted by a program advisory board revealed that, while emerging leaders were interested in developing their leadership potential, they had yet to do so for a variety of reasons. Those reasons included things such as limited experience in a leadership role, reluctance to commit to an in-depth leadership program, and/or uncertainty about how to become a leader.

To meet the challenge and concern about limited time and other resources to commit to an in-depth leadership development program, the Leadership in Your Community Conference (LYCC) was developed as a one-day regional leadership education event targeting rural areas. Two LYCCs were held in rural northwest and southeast Oklahoma in 1996 and 1998. Approximately 185 persons participated in the two events, and approximately 90 of those could be described as emerging leaders. The events were conducted in response to the need to develop community leaders who can influence the impact and direction of changes as America's rural communities evolve to meet the needs of changing populations, economic base, and infrastructure. The one-day conference was strongly advocated by a program advisory board as an alternative leadership education methodology targeting individuals in rural areas with limited access to leadership education programs.

The Leadership in Your Community Conferences were conducted by the Oklahoma Family Community Leadership Program (OFCLP), a statewide leadership program. The LYCC format, however, was created to be a separate event in that it was not part of the on-going OFCLP curriculum.

Co-sponsorships allowed the OFCLP to offer the educational events for a minimal participant registration fee of \$15, including food functions and materials. The conferences had two objectives, which were stated in terms of what individuals would learn through participation in the educational event:

- To increase their leadership potential
- To become involved or increase their involvement in community leadership activities.

On-site evaluations of the educational events were conducted at both events at the end of the conference. A study focusing on the two objectives of the LYCC revealed very positive responses (Daugherty and Williams, 1998a). In addition, retrospective pretests conducted at each LYCC showed that participants had statistically significant knowledge gain in several of the educational sessions (Daugherty and Williams, 1998b).

The researchers and conference sponsors determined, however, that an evaluation of the long-term outcomes was needed. The long-term evaluation would help the OFCLP Board of Directors make decisions about future resource allocations and program refinements.

There is a call for determining the long-term outcomes of volunteer leadership development programming – going beyond the numbers reached and knowledge gained. Curnan and LaCava (1998) pointed out that measuring outcomes was an important part of the leadership development process. Ladewig (1999) cautioned that outcomes were essential to articulating program accountability.

### **Purpose and Objectives of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to determine the long-term outcomes of two one-day educational events each called the Leadership in Your Community Conference relative to the conferences' objectives. *Long-term* was defined as at least 21 months after the conference.

The objectives of the study were to determine to what extent the following had occurred:

- Change in participants' awareness of their own leadership potential
- Change in participants' involvement in community leadership activities
- Usefulness of the LYCC to the participating emerging leaders

### **Procedures**

Design. The study was based on a descriptive design. According to Best (1981), a descriptive study “describes and interprets what is” (p. 93). As a descriptive evaluation, this study was concerned with past events and influences as related to current conditions. Evaluation “adds the ingredient of value judgment of the social utility, desirability, or effectiveness of a process, product or program” (Best, p.

93).

Treatment. The LYCC format featured three general sessions and concurrent sessions on eight topics. The seven-hour conferences were held in rural communities on weekdays during business hours (9 a.m. to 4 p.m.).

Subjects. Subjects were self-selected emerging leaders who participated in either of the two conferences. Of the approximately 90 participants who met the definition of emerging leaders, 59 could be located for the study.

Instrumentation. The researchers developed the instrument for this study for use in telephone interviews. There were 11 items addressing the objectives of the study and four demographic items (gender, age group, ethnicity and community size).

Administration of the instrument. Two weeks prior to the telephone interview, the researchers sent a pre-interview letter to each subject. The letter announced that the study was being conducted, described its purpose and format, requested the subjects' voluntary and anonymous participation in the study, and provided a list of topics that would be addressed in the telephone interview. The instrument was administered by telephone interview 40 months and 21 months after the 1996 and 1998 conferences, respectively. Trained interviewers with the Bureau of Social Research at Oklahoma State University conducted the telephone interviews.

## Findings

Response rate / Interview length. Subjects completed 48 telephone interviews, for a response rate of 81%. The average length of the interview was approximately 12 minutes.

Demographics. Data on demographics reflected the following:

Gender. A total of 71% of the subjects were females, and 29% were males.

Age groups. At the time of the study, most subjects were over the age of 40. The breakdown by age groups was as follows:

Born prior to 1930	10%	Born in the 1950s	23%
Born in the 1930s	29%	Born in the 1960s	8%
Born in the 1940s	25%	Born in the 1970s or after	4%

Ethnicity. Data on ethnicity reflected the following:

African American	6%	White (not of Latino/a origin)	77%
Latino/a	-	Asian or Pacific Islander	-
Native American	17%	Other	-

Community size. Most subjects (78%) said the population of their communities was 10,000 or less. The breakdown by community size was as follows:

1,000 or less	27%	10,001 – 50,000	23%
1,001 – 5,000	38%	Over 50,000	-
5,001 – 10,000	13%		

Objective 1: Change in participants’ awareness of their own leadership potential. Most subjects (85%) reported some change. The *extent of increase in awareness* was reported as follows:

Increased awareness a great deal	27%
Increased awareness somewhat	58%
Not at all	15%

When asked in what *ways their leadership awareness increased*, subjects reported a variety of things. The more common responses included the following:

Increased personal confidence	9 responses
Increased awareness of need for personal action related to leadership roles	8 responses
Increased awareness of local resources and opportunities	5 responses
Inspired leadership abilities	4 responses

Objective 2: Change in participants’ involvement in community leadership activities. Almost half of the subjects reported that they had *increased their involvement in community leadership activities* since the conference, as follows:

Yes	46%	No	54%
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Subjects were asked to describe briefly the *types of new leadership roles, activities, and/or projects* with which they had become involved since the conference. Their responses were quite diverse and fell into the following seven categories:

Citizen development	Safety and health	Agriculture policy
Economic development	Housing	Community pride
Youth development		

When asked in what *ways their community leadership activities changed as a result of the conference*, subjects again gave a variety of responses which fell into the following 10 categories:

Got more involved (most common response – 14)	More aware of people’s feelings
Realized the need for good leadership	Inspiration
More confident / aggressive	Gained expertise in leadership
Able to ask better questions	Got more people involved
Started teaching and/or using leadership on the job	More positive experiences

Regarding the *number of hours per month serving in a community leadership capacity*, subjects’

responses ranged from zero to 240 hours per month. The mean was 34.4 hours per month. A total of 19 subjects (40%) said they had *increased the number of hours* serving in a community leadership capacity as a result of the conference.

Objective 3: Usefulness of the LYCC to the participating emerging leaders. Subjects were asked about the usefulness of three aspects of the conference, as well as the total conference. Their responses predominantly fell into the categories of “very useful” and “useful” (Table 1).

Table 1. Usefulness of the conference

	Very Useful	Useful	Somewhat Useful	Not Useful
General sessions	35%	36%	19%	10%
Concurrent sessions	27%	40%	16%	17%
Interaction with other participants	48%	29%	13%	10%
Total conference	48%	33%	19%	-

When asked if there was anything else about the conference that was useful, subjects identified the following aspects:

- Sessions on body language / personalities
- Location / site
- Session on parliamentary procedure
- Session on fund raising
- The conference experience built their confidence

## Conclusions

The findings of the study provided evidence that the one-day leadership conference format resulted in two outcomes.

1. The first outcome was positive change over the long-term in two areas: awareness of leadership potential and community involvement. Although more than half of the subjects (54%) reported that their involvement in community leadership roles did not increase, a sizeable number (46%) reported that they did increase their involvement as a result of the conference.
2. The second outcome addressed the usefulness of the leadership development conference experience. Subjects overwhelmingly reported (81%) that the conference was “useful” to “very useful”.

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