

**BUILDING BETTER COMMUNITIES THROUGH LEADERSHIP AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:  
A MODEL INITIATIVE FOR RURAL REVITALIZATION**

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Presentation Track    Research

This presentation reports follow-up evaluation of the leadership component of a unique program created by the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service with the potential to be duplicated nation-wide. The goal of the *Initiative for the Future of Rural Oklahoma* is to turn leadership training into meaningful results for the community.

## **Biographical Profiles**

### **Renée A. Daugherty, Ph.D.**

Renée Daugherty earned a doctorate in Human Environmental Sciences (Administration and Education) from Oklahoma State University, as well as an M.S. and B.S. in Education. She has been with Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service (OCES) since 1978. As an OSU faculty member and OCES state specialist, Dr. Daugherty is responsible for Extension programs on community leadership and Extension teaching methods. She gives leadership to the following programs:

- Initiative for the Future of Rural Oklahoma – a community development program combining leadership development and economic development
- Citizen Engagement through Public Deliberation Program
- LeadershipPlenty Program
- Extension Teaching Methods Program
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Dr. Daugherty has managed over \$500,000 in externally funded Extension projects as well as co-developed grant proposals resulting in over \$1.5 million in funding for additional Extension projects. She has authored over 20 journal and Extension publications and proceedings, and has produced over 60 audio visual and multimedia educational materials and learning packages. Dr. Daugherty is active in professional associations and has held state and national offices. She has also been recognized by national, state and local awards.

### **Sue E. Williams, Ph.D.**

Sue Williams holds a doctorate in Environmental Science from Oklahoma State University and M.S. in Resource Management from Iowa State University. As an OSU faculty member and Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service (OCES) state specialist, she currently has responsibilities for leadership development and family policy programs. Dr. Williams has been with the OCES at OSU since 1977. During this time she has obtained and managed over \$1.2 million in externally funded Extension and research projects. She has over 50 journal and Extension publications, and has produced over 20 audio visual educational materials as well as having extensive experience in producing and presenting educational information through the mass media. Among her varied responsibilities, she works with the Oklahoma Team Leadership Program—a leadership development and public issues education program helping citizens to develop skills to enhance the quality of life in their communities. She also provides leadership for the Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation, a partnership of representatives from statewide organizations interested in fostering citizen involvement in public decision making. Dr. Williams is co-director of the Oklahoma Public Policy Institute and serves as a national resource person for the Kettering Foundation.

**Building Better Communities Through Leadership and Economic Development:  
A Model Initiative for Rural Revitalization**

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## **Building Better Communities Through Leadership and Economic Development: A Model Initiative for Rural Revitalization**

### **Introduction**

In a 2002 publication, the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) stated that “If Extension is to thrive, it must understand and rapidly adjust to rapid changes and emerging challenges.” One of the challenges identified by the committee was the need to address the “social and economic issues that face all communities.” While many of this country’s rural communities were founded on agricultural, the reality for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that agriculture’s economic impact on our communities has declined. For example, the fraction of the national workforce engaged in farm employment has been cut by more than half since 1970. In that year farm employment totaled 4.3% of the work force compared to just 1.8% in 2003. Even in the agriculturally dependent state of Oklahoma, farm employment has declined from 8.5% in 1970 to 4.3% in 2003. Beaulieu (2002, p. 1) states that “retail trade and services have now replaced agriculture and manufacturing as the economic drivers of rural America.” Indeed, this decline of agriculture’s contribution to the national economy may be a recognizable feature of the development process in all developing countries (Punyasavatsut & Coxhead, 2002). A recent article produced by the Center for the Study of Rural America notes “rural communities are beginning to think regionally to seize the opportunities of globalization and exploit high-value niche markets in agriculture, manufacturing, and services” (Henderson & Weiler, 2004, p. 2). Agriculture will continue to be important for many rural areas, but other opportunities must be considered as well.

If our rural economies are currently being shaped by global forces, to what direction should local community leaders look for answers regarding the economic development of their communities? For that matter, where will these emerging leaders be found to address these complex issues? For example, when citizens of all 77 of Oklahoma’s counties were asked to identify the most critical issues in their communities, the most common issues were related to community and economic development and leadership development. Similar findings emerged from a series of community forums held in Texas in 1999.

Rural residents are concerned about the sustainability of their local economies. Residents from Washita County, OK said it well when they indicated a need for a “higher pay scale and better paying jobs [to] keep young people in the community after college.” Citizens in Freestone County, TX expressed a need to develop and expand leadership and volunteerism for all ages.

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service (OCES) viewed the results of their community listening sessions as a cry for help from rural Oklahoma. Acting aggressively, the OCES unveiled the *Initiative for the Future of Rural Oklahoma* project. The *Initiative* directly addresses the issues of leadership and community economic development that rural Oklahomans so powerfully expressed in the community listening sessions. After the first year of this pilot program, the impacts are both remarkable and measurable. To quote a participant from Greer County, “We have received more good from the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service and the Greer County office in the past year than I can ever remember before.” What Extension professional wouldn’t want to hear that kind of praise about one of their programs? We at the

OCES believe that this kind of program could be easily duplicated, and has the potential to work effectively in any state in the nation.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the reader to the program known as the *Initiative for the Future of Rural Oklahoma*, developed by the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service. From the original request for proposals, to the kick-off retreat attended by approximately 80 local citizens, to the recent follow-up survey to these same participants, this paper will describe the program and its impact on Extension programming in 17 counties in the state. Lessons learned will be presented as well as a link to program resources available on the web.

### **Request for Proposals**

From April to June 2002, the 77 county Extension offices across the state of Oklahoma were invited to submit proposals for leadership and/or economic development programs to be funded by the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service. The program was titled the *Initiative for the Future of Rural Oklahoma*. Community, county or multi-community/county proposals were welcomed and encouraged. Preference was given to proposals demonstrating broad based participation from community members and groups in their economic and leadership development efforts. Strong local Extension staff interest and commitment was also a prerequisite for community selection. By the end of June, proposals representing 37 counties had been submitted. Several of the proposals were multi-county efforts. A total of 13 proposals, representing 17 counties, were accepted in two categories. (Refer to Figure 1.)

- **Initial Leadership Training:** These one-year proposals focused on skill building through leadership training. The primary focus was on initial leadership training, organizational skills, and visioning. Grant funds of up to \$9,000 were awarded to each of 10 projects in this category.
- **Comprehensive Leadership Training:** These three-year proposals also focused on skill building through leadership training, but, in addition, these proposals identified a community project that related to leadership development and/or economic development. Grant funds of up to \$90,000 were awarded to each of three projects in this category.

Both sets of grant recipients were allowed to spend funds for guest lecturers, facility rental, tour transportation, lodging and meals, equipment, supplies, community surveys, technical assistance, grant writers, publicity, workshop expense and other appropriate purposes as shown in their approved project budget. Grant recipients, including local citizens and extension educators, committed considerable time and resources to the effort. Each grant recipient was expected to provide local cash or in-kind match. A minimum amount equal to 10% of the awarded grant was required. This project was intended to be a partnership between Extension and the community.

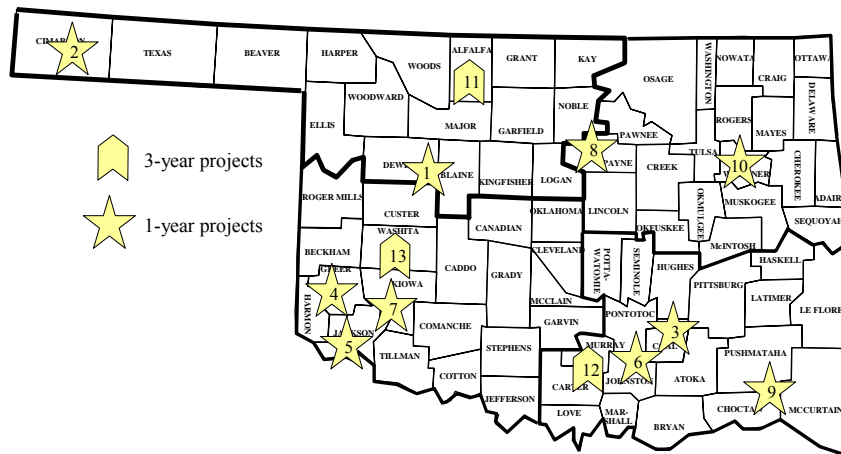
Benefits offered to communities participating in the *Initiative* included:

1. Training was provided in community leadership and economic development. OCES Specialists, as well as other agency personnel, provided training in:
  - Economic Diversification
  - Community Planning

- Service Infrastructure
  - Local Government
  - Civic Engagement and Leadership Development
  - Youth and Adult Workforce Development
2. Regional training programs were offered to community teams. These regional training programs provided team members with intermediate and advance training in the topics listed above and others.
  3. Educational material, technical assistance, and problem solving expertise to aid in leadership and community economic development were provided.
  4. Sustained follow-up, technical assistance, and support were made available to the participating communities.
  5. Technical assistance to help evaluate the project was made available to the communities.

The training and assistance provided to the projects served to highlight the resources available from the Oklahoma Cooperative Service. A resident of Porter in Wagoner County said, “If it hadn’t been for the leadership project, we would not have known of all the opportunities and programs available.”

Figure 1. Oklahoma *Initiative* Counties



### Kick-Off Retreat

In November of 2002, representatives from each of the 13 *Initiative* projects attended a three-day “kick-off” retreat held at the U.S. Postal training facility in Norman, OK. The three days were full of fun, food, and fellowship, but also a lot of hard work. In general, each project brought about 8 local residents to the retreat, including one or two Extension educators. The other team members were volunteers from the community who were considered “core” members of the local project.

Retreat participants met together for several learning sessions in a large group setting. Some of the distinguished guests who spoke to the community representatives included Brent Kisling, State Director of USDA Rural Development, Representative Danny Hilliard, Oklahoma House Speaker Pro Tempore, and Dr. Chester Fehlis, Associate Vice Chancellor and Director, Texas Cooperative Extension.

Participants also attended some breakout sessions in one of two possible tracts: “economic development,” directed by Dr. Mike Woods and “leadership and civic engagement,” directed by Dr. Sue Williams and Dr. Renee Daugherty. Most community teams sent representatives to sessions in both tracts. In these sessions, the community leaders learned about teachable programs that would be available to take back to their communities. They also learned about available resources and contacts. Many of these potential contacts were on hand for a resource fair, giving participants the opportunity to network with representatives from agencies such as the Oklahoma Department of Commerce, Rural Enterprises, Inc., USDA Rural Development, etc.

Throughout the first year, many of these resource contacts developed into partners with the local projects. Leadership Oklahoma was an active participant in some of the counties, so too was the Southwest Technology Center and Western Oklahoma State College. Other partners included the Museum of the Western Prairie, Oklahoma Department of Tourism, Oklahoma Gas and Electric Company, Boys and Girls Club, Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, Department of Human Services, and Oklahoma Primary Care Association. Frankly, the *Initiative* has served as a basis from which county educators have developed a statewide network with agencies willing and available to provide assistance with economic and leadership development projects.

### **The One-Year Pilot *Initiative***

The time line for the one-year pilot *Initiative* was from November 2002 through November 2003, although each of the individual 13 projects had their own time line to follow. The state of Oklahoma is quite diverse, and so were each of the 13 projects, reflecting each community’s unique set of needs.

A central county that is home to a state university wanted to initiate a leadership training program in two small towns—both of which were adjacent to the largest city in the county. A northern county that is home to a selenite crystal digging area received a three-year grant to develop tourism opportunities in their county. Leaders in this county are still hard at work developing a video to promote tourism in the county, as well as maintaining a website, and training local employees how to promote tourism through quality service.

Three counties in the southeastern corner of the state joined together to provide leadership training to a culturally diverse group of underserved youth, while three counties in the west teamed up to pursue economic development opportunities in the historically agriculturally-based area. Furthermore, several of the projects lead to the creation of community based economic development organizations that have the potential to sustain themselves in the future.

A number of the projects report an outstanding side effect of the *Initiative*. Citizens and communities within the counties began to pull together, often for the first time in recent years, to work for the good of the county. A three-year project reports cooperation between the two largest communities in the county. This particular county is rich in natural resources and the citizens of both communities have decided to work together to promote tourism opportunities.

After one year, the following statistics were reported by the 13 projects:

- Total number of leaders trained in first year: 557
- Total citizen contacts during first year: 3,145
- Total educational programs presented: 112
- Total newspaper articles published: 126
- Total radio/television broadcasts: 36
- Total newsletters published: 31
- Total videos developed: 6

### **Follow-up Evaluation of Leadership**

In May 2004 a follow-up evaluation of leadership was mailed to the original core leaders and extension staff who attended the kick-off workshop in November of 2002. Of the 83 surveys mailed, 46 were returned, for a completion rate of 55.4%. Several questions asked the participant to summarize their experiences with the *Initiative*. The responses to these summary questions revealed a lot about how the participants viewed the *Initiative* project.

- When asked how their personal involvement in their community has changed since participating in the *Initiative*, 56.5% claim that involvement has increased while 41.3% say that involvement is about the same. Of the 19 respondents who report no change in involvement, 5 commented that their involvement is, and has always been, very high.
- More than 39.1% say that their attitude toward local leaders has improved since participating in the *Initiative*. No change is reported by about 58.7%.
- As a result of participating in the *Initiative*, 21.7% claim that the power structure in their community is more inclusive and diverse; 45.7% say that the power structure is somewhat more inclusive and diverse.
- After participating in the *Initiative*, 54.3% report that their attitude about the future of their community has improved.
- To sum up their experience, 32.6% agreed that the *Initiative* was “one of the best things I have ever done for my community,” and another 56.5% agreed that the *Initiative* was “challenging and frustrating at times, but I’m glad I participated.”

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

Future prospects for the *Initiative* are very promising. In December 2003, *Initiative* team members made a presentation to a State of Oklahoma Legislative task force addressing rural development. Oklahoma’s Governor, Brad Henry, has released an action plan, EDGE (Economic Development Generating Excellence), that identifies the key role higher education will play in statewide economic development efforts. The *Initiative* has been presented as one tool to aid with the EDGE effort. Furthermore, OCES has successfully partnered with several community and state

organizations/agencies through the *Initiative* project, including the Oklahoma Department of Commerce and Leadership Oklahoma.

In March 2004, the ten one-year pilot *Initiative* projects were invited to apply for some “second-round” funding to further enhance their local efforts. Instead of focusing on initial training efforts, they were asked to identify a specific project to be funded. Six of these proposals were funded and include plans to promote a 220-mile scenic pathway, plans to promote local business retention and expansion, and website development.

Turning leadership training into meaningful results for the community is the goal of the *Initiative for the Future of Rural Oklahoma*. During the first year, local Extension personnel worked with community leaders to pilot the *Initiative* concept. Enthusiasm has emanated from each project. The next step in the *Initiative* process is to capture that enthusiasm and to link the aspirations of community leaders with the capacity of OSU to help develop strategies, identify resources, and turn dreams into reality. Already, the Initiative projects have been featured at a series of in-service training sessions titled “Healthy Communities,” giving *Initiative* participants the opportunity to share their lessons-learned with other communities and other Extension educators.

Interestingly enough, one of the significant lessons learned from the program was that a county-wide leadership program may not be as expensive as one might think. Most of the one-year projects were initially budgeted \$8,000 to \$9,000. Basically, none of the projects used the full amount. Most of them spent about \$5,000. Furthermore, one of the counties that did not receive funding in the program raised private monies to conduct their own leadership training program. How much did they raise—about \$5,000 from local sources. This brings up a second lesson-learned. If a county is interested enough in the issue of community economic and leadership development, and if they have a model to follow, they can conduct their own local program. It is not beyond their reach.

Several other broad lessons and observations that the Initiative resource team learned include the following:

- **Local commitment is a key ingredient.** Some local resources should be provided. This is a form of “equity” investment for the community.
- **Local ownership results from dollar commitment as well as other forms of investment.** The community leaders (and emerging leaders) need to take an active role in the planning and implementation of the effort.
- **Wide and diverse involvement from the community is critical.** All segments of the local population should be included. When countywide or multi-county efforts are involved, this includes geographic diversity as well.
- **Sound information is critical to enhance educational efforts.** This includes well-documented teaching modules for leadership training and reliable data on community trends.
- **Multiple sources of information will challenge and engage local citizens.** Utilizing partnerships, collaboration, web-based information and other sources of information keeps the program exciting. Old assumptions should be challenged and new ideas or concepts should be explored.

The current challenges faced by Extension are not singular to Oklahoma. In particular, Extension programs across the south are shifting resources toward community development. Other states such as Louisiana and Mississippi have launched aggressive efforts to support community development programming. The resources developed through the *Initiative* represent one model for addressing some of these challenges. Many of these resources have been made available on the web at [http://ifro.okstate.edu/Ed\\_Resource.asp](http://ifro.okstate.edu/Ed_Resource.asp). Daugherty and Williams (2004) have prepared a more detailed description of the modules developed for the *Initiative*, including the Leadership Development component.

The *Initiative* project is simply the beginning. It demonstrates what can happen when community leaders partner with their local Extension office to hone leadership skills and to access the capacity of Oklahoma State University (OSU) and the land-grant university system to improve their community and enrich the lives of those who call it home. Long-term benefits will come only through a partnership from which local leaders, the county Extension office, and OSU all learn, benefit, and grow.

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