Factors Influencing Leadership Development and Community Involvement in Limited Resource Communities

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Introduction  Leadership capacity development is important to the viability of rural limited resource communities. These communities often have barriers to formal, traditional leadership development because they lack the mechanisms most commonly used to provide training in leadership. These mechanisms include advanced education followed by mentoring and training through business and public service organizations. Relationships established through mentoring and training provide opportunities for leaders to establish working relationships with other leaders. An unfortunate outcome of limited resources is that residents in these communities often lack the abilities and opportunities to develop effective solutions to their needs and problems. A major reason for this is the absence of local leadership and the means to develop effective leadership.

A program that has been developed for the express purpose of developing effective leaders in limited resource communities is called Community Voices (CV). It was developed by researchers in the Cooperative Extension Program at North Carolina A & T State University and other collaborators with funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. The goal of the CV program is to increase the number of leaders in various rural, poverty-stricken areas in four southern states (Alabama, Arkansas, Texas and North Carolina) and to increase the leadership skills of those leaders to the extent that they become involved in community decision-making. The program focuses on developing leadership skills and community decision-making among local residents who show potential for leadership roles in their communities.

Purpose  The purpose of the current research was to conduct a follow-up study of the CV program. The researchers examined the relationship of leadership actions and behaviors of graduates of the Community Voices program on the development, implementation, execution and completion of service-to-the community actions in their home communities in 11 counties in North Carolina. More specifically, this study examined the factors influencing leadership development in rural areas which allowed the researchers to have a better understanding of how leadership development leads to community involvement and impact. Based upon a series of listening sessions, personal interviews of participants of the Community Voices program, and interviews of stakeholders located throughout each of the study counties, data were collected from each of these sources and the findings are displayed in various charts and tables showing which factors had the most influence on leadership development in each of the study counties in North Carolina.

Conclusion  The findings of the study suggest that leadership development is important to the viability of limited resource communities. More specifically, the most important factors influencing leadership development include: on-going leadership training, viable leadership structure, acceptance of shared leadership, and recognition of resources available and required within and outside the community.

Importance  This study can serve as a basis for developing different types of educational programs that involve mentoring and on-going training of individuals through business, public service organizations and Extension. Relationships established through mentoring and training provide opportunities for leaders to establish working relationships with other leaders, and address some of the factors identified in this study. Implementation of these findings may lead to increased community involvement in and development of poor rural areas in North Carolina.