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Perspectives on Place-Based Local Leadership Programs: Fostering Leadership and Community Attachment in Youths

Abstract

Leadership development, service learning, place-based education, and economic revitalization are topics relevant to Extension. We performed an evaluation to determine whether a place-based leadership program in Clermont County, Ohio, helps students develop leadership skills and encourages their return to the community. Program evaluation data collected via a web-based survey indicated that 80% of youths planned to return to the area to live and work, an action that would contribute to revitalization of the community. Extension professionals can use findings from our evaluation as a basis for improving existing programs, structuring new youth leadership initiatives, and communicating the value of place-based youth leadership programs to stakeholders.

Keywords: [experiential learning](#), [place-based education](#), [service learning](#), [youth leadership development](#)

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Introduction

Employers and community members wish to see youths thrive in their communities and remain after pursuing higher education (Jenkins, Neal, & Royalty, 2012). Youth leadership programs aid youths of all ages in developing effective leadership skills and deploying those skills for the betterment of their communities, such as through involvement with businesses, social services organizations, government entities, faith-based organizations, and families, to make a significant positive impact (Edelman, Gill, Comerford, Larson, & Hare, 2004). Youth leadership programs offer experiential training to increase understanding and practical application of ethical, effective leadership behaviors and include learning components addressing critical life skills such as communication, career readiness, critical thinking, and teamwork (Fertman & van Linden, 1999).

Leadership, which has been defined as a "trait or ability, a skill or a behavior and a relationship or process" (Northouse, 2012, p. 9), is needed wherever there are people (Kister, 1995). Youth leadership development

can be enhanced in various settings and through interactions with teachers, coaches, youth organization sponsors, employers, and community leaders. In all situations, youths are expected to work through projects and solve practical problems at the personal, familial, and community levels (Gallagher & Costal, 2012). Through local leadership development programs, Extension professionals can provide necessary skills training while addressing the need for youths to remain and thrive in communities.

The evaluation reported here focused on the LOOK to Clermont place-based youth leadership program, a local Extension initiative for high school juniors and seniors in Clermont County, Ohio. The program involves county-based Extension educators from the family and consumer sciences, 4-H youth development, agriculture and natural resources, and community development program areas. Accordingly, the results of our evaluation have Extension-wide implications, with applicability to similar programs.

Program Description

The purpose of LOOK to Clermont is to promote workforce preparation and networking with peers and organization/business leaders to prepare the county's teens for leadership and instill within them a sense of community that may encourage them to remain in the county or return there one day to live and work (Covey, 2004). Students are selected through nomination by their respective schools.

Agricultural education programs such as FFA and 4-H provide leadership opportunities and develop soft skills for students (e.g., Radhakrishna & Doamekpor, 2009). In FFA, students are exposed to experiences designed to enhance leadership development, career success, and personal growth through classroom experience, supervised agricultural experiences, and FFA engagement (National FFA Organization, 2015). The LOOK to Clermont program follows a similar model by including classroom leadership experience, service learning, and place-based education and encompasses the motto "preparing tomorrow's leaders today." Students strengthen their leadership skills by exploring foundations of leadership, engaging in service learning, and experiencing their community through 10 monthly theme days conducted throughout the county (Table 1).

Table 1.

Themes of LOOK to Clermont Place-Based Theme Days

Theme	Description
Call-to-action orientation	Students explore the program through Real Colors, a facilitated human behavior and communication workshop, to gain an understanding of the importance of leadership and receive strategic motivation to kick off their leadership experience.
Team building	Students work in teams to learn about collaborative strategies for working with others in their future.
Agriculture and history bus tour	Students engage in agriculture and history through a bus tour of the county.
Civic engagement	Students meet with elected leaders and learn more about the role of government officials.
Personal finance	Students learn the importance of financial management and how to pay for their futures.
Education	Students discover educational opportunities available to them by thinking about their goals and what type of education is needed for their careers of interest.

Feature	
Public safety and justice	Students meet with county law enforcement officials and learn about the judicial system by visiting the county court.
Creating healthy lifestyles	Students develop visions of their futures as they learn about relevant trends and consider how their choices can affect their lives in the long term.
Community development	Students learn about global and community economic issues.
Call to leadership/commencement	Students celebrate their experience in the program with a call to leadership and commencement.

Theme day content incorporates experiential learning principles, local community leaders, and the six impacts of community leadership development: personal development, community obligation, purposefulness, community familiarity, civic engagement, and social unity (Pigg, Gasteyer, Martin, Apaliyah, & Keating, 2015). The program team helps learners practice personal communication skills using emerging technologies and online learning platforms. Prior to our study, evaluation activities had been comprised exclusively of short-term monthly theme day evaluations.

Theoretical Framework Applied to the Program Evaluation

Educators using place-based education situate students in businesses and organizations within their communities to provide the knowledge and leadership skills needed "to regenerate and sustain communities" (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008, p. 109). For the purpose of our study, we defined place-based education as an approach that connects learning to local community—that is, education based on a particular place or location (Pigg et al., 2015). A primary strength of place-based education is that it can be adapted to the unique characteristics of particular places (Smith, Sobel, Guttag, & Guttag, 2010). Learning in an environment where sense of place is cultivated increases a topic's significance (Rote, Schroeder, & D'Augustino, 2015). Through place-based education programs, students discover the answer to why they need to know certain information by working through tasks to increase their knowledge (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). Students can be empowered to become engaged citizens in their communities when assets and needs are available to guide learning (Rote et al., 2015).

Evaluations of place-based programming have revealed improved learning and community engagement, demonstrating that students who are engaged in real-world learning are more likely to prosper (Powers, 2004). Many place-based education programs incorporate civic engagement and contribute to communities through service learning (Hayes, 2001). Youth leadership programs have increased community vitality as well as connectivity between government and social groups in time of disaster (Osofsky, Osofsky, Hansel, Lawrason, & Speier, 2018). Placed-based leadership development encourages students to build soft skills used by leaders and to return to their home communities to live and work (Pigg et al., 2015). One study showed that participation in leadership programs relates to improved leadership skills and indicates that social support, civic engagement, and social interactions are influential to students (Osmane & Brennan, 2018). Although some valuable information on these programs and their impacts exists (Edelman et al., 2004), there is, concerningly, inadequate documentation of place-based youth program impacts (Edelman et al., 2004; Hayes, 2001).

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of our study was to determine how LOOK to Clermont had performed to date. The objectives were as follows:

1. Identify student participants' perceptions of the program.
2. Identify student participants' postprogram career paths and influence of the program on career intentions.
3. Identify students' perspectives on which components of the program were most beneficial.
4. Identify opportunities for improving the program.

Methodology

We used survey methodology to fulfill our study objectives. The study population comprised individuals who had participated in the LOOK to Clermont program from 2012 to 2017 ($N = 120$). We conducted a census because of the small number of program participants to date (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006). We used a researcher-developed instrument (Table 2) as we did not find an existing evaluation instrument for place-based youth leadership programs. We used an expert panel review to minimize threats to face validity (Ary et al., 2006). The panel members, two Extension specialists and three Extension agents, were given instructions to ensure that the language was clear and the instrument measured the intended objectives.

Table 2.

LOOK to Clermont Evaluation Study Objectives and Correlating Questionnaire Items

Study objective	Questionnaire item	Question type
Identify student participants' perceptions of the program.	Please describe your experience with the program.	Essay answer
	How has the program benefited you or changed your lifestyle? ^a	Essay answer
Identify student participants' postprogram career paths and influence of the program on career intentions.	Do you plan to remain in the county to live and work?	Multiple choice ^b
	What is the highest level of education you have completed?	Multiple choice ^c
	How did the program change your career path intentions? ^a	Essay answer
	How have you utilized the leadership skills gained through the program?	Essay answer
Identify students' perspectives on which components of the program were most beneficial.	Which theme day from the program has helped you the most in achieving long-term success?	Rank order/drag and drop ^d
	The program encompasses three components (classroom leadership experience, service learning, and place-based education). Which did you find most beneficial?	Rank order/drag and drop ^e
Identify opportunities for improving the program.	Are additional or focused components needed for the program?	Multiple choice ^f
	What are opportunities to improve the program?	Essay answer
	Is there a topic that should be added to the program?	Essay answer

aRespondents received this question only if they answered *yes* to a prior *yes/no* question asking whether change had occurred. bPossible responses were *yes* or *no*. cPossible responses were *some high school, high school, associate's, bachelor's, master's, PhD, doctoral or higher*. dRespondents were asked to rank order the 10 theme days. eRespondents were asked to rank order the components of classroom leadership experience, service learning, and place-based education. fPossible responses were *yes* or *no*; respondents who answered *yes* were asked to suggest potential components for the program.

We used a modified tailored design method for web-based questionnaires (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014). We informed potential respondents about the study using presurvey post cards. We then sent the questionnaire via an email web link through Qualtrics, followed by reminders sent at 14, 26, 30, and 44 days after the initial distribution to increase the response rate (Archer, 2008). We also posted the survey link on the alumni social media page. We used some students' secondary email addresses due to outdated contact information and examined the responses to ensure that duplicate responses were not recorded. Twenty-one individuals were inaccessible due to incorrect email addresses, reducing the accessible population to 99 program graduates. We received 23 completed questionnaires ($n = 23$), for a response rate of 23%. Our response rate aligned with expectations: In 2017, researchers reported average response rates between 21.4% and 24.9% for web-based surveys (Cox-O'Neill et al., 2017; Kratsch, Skelly, Hill, & Donaldson, 2017; Voelz et al., 2017). A variety of factors, such as respondents' familiarity with the person sending the survey or lack of interest, could have contributed to the low response rate (Monroe & Adams, 2012).

Findings

Not all study participants answered every question on the evaluation instrument. Percentages and frequencies reported herein are based on number of respondents who provided a response for a particular question.

Objective One: Identify Student Participants' Perceptions of the Program

Overall, participants had favorable perceptions of the program and indicated that they had benefited from participating. Most respondents, 86.6% ($f = 11$), provided testimonials about the program that were overall very positive. For example, Respondent 5 said, "It was a fun and interactive experience that helped open my eyes to the community. . . . this program was a great way to see the community and to appreciate all that it has to offer." Respondent 4 stated, "LOOK to Clermont made me realize that I can have an impact on my community." Of the respondents who discussed changes to their lifestyle, only 15% ($f = 2$) indicated that the program had not benefited them personally.

Objective Two: Identify Student Participants' Postprogram Career Paths and Influence of the Program on Career Intentions

After the program, most students had attended college and either had stayed in Clermont County to do so or planned to return after graduating. Approximately 73% of respondents ($f = 17$) were still in college, and 9% ($f = 2$) were fully employed. No participants reported that they were unemployed or looking for work. Further, 52% of respondents ($f = 11$) had remained in Clermont County to pursue higher education while living and/or working in the county. Of the five respondents who identified where they attended college,

three stated that they attended local colleges near Clermont County that partner with the program. Of those participants who went to other states to pursue educational opportunities, 80% ($f = 8$) indicated that they were planning to return to Clermont County to live and work. The experience also provided a way to connect with higher education entities and employers, as evidenced by some lasting connections made by participants. Respondent 3 said, "Having the program on my resume helped me make a connection with a company, which employed me as a co-op student. I hope to work there after graduation."

The program helped participants access opportunities and clarify their aspirations. Twenty-five percent of respondents ($f = 5$) indicated that the program influenced their career intentions. For example, Respondent 7 stated, "It was one of the most influential experiences of my high school career. . . . It was not until reflection where I realized the magnitude of impact this program had on myself. This impact included a new-found appreciation for my county and the citizens. The program also provided me professional and academic opportunities. And lastly personal benefits, such as leadership, communication, and interpersonal skills. It has truly benefitted me in many ways."

Testimonials illustrated the program's impact on participants' career paths as well. As an example, Respondent 1 said, "I was not sure what I wanted to do while in the program, but this program gave me a view of all the different types of jobs and backgrounds that are out there and gave me new choices to explore." In addition, Respondent 2 noted, "It gave me the leadership and interpersonal skills that I needed to pursue a career with the intention to evolve into a leader within my professional field. From the leadership development courses, I found my strengths and aligned them with a career interest." All five respondents who described the program's influence on their career paths explained that it had affected them positively.

Objective Three: Identify Students' Perspectives on Which Components of the Program Were Most Beneficial

Respondents ranked the value of each of the 10 place-based theme days to their long-term success (Table 3). They ranked the days focused on team building and personal finance as the most valuable and the orientation and commencement days as least valuable. There was, however, considerable variability among the participants' responses.

Table 3.

Place-Based Theme Days Mean Rank by Usefulness to Respondents' Long-Term Success

Place-based theme day	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Team building	3.00	1.97
Personal finance	3.70	2.47
Education	3.85	2.25
Public safety and justice	5.65	1.95
Creating healthy lifestyles	5.75	2.84
Civic engagement	5.95	2.78
Community development	6.20	2.88
Agriculture and history bus tour	6.45	2.68

Feature		
Call-to-action orientation	6.75	3.16
Call to leadership/commencement	7.70	2.30

Note. Twenty participants responded to the survey item. Respondents were asked to rank which theme day from the program had helped them the most in achieving long-term success (1 = *most useful*, 10 = *least useful*). Themes for the program were selected by county and community needs assessment data as well as stakeholder priority areas.

There was also variability in participants' opinions of the three program components—classroom leadership experience, service learning, and place-based education. Respondent 4 focused on leadership development as being beneficial by stating, "This program gave me confidence to emerge as a leader within the community. It greatly eased my transition to college and the workplace. Following the completion of this program, my leadership skills, professionalism, and communication skills had greatly improved. The application of the lessons and skills from LOOK to Clermont allowed me to achieve leadership roles in local non-profit agencies as well as a part-time job in a professional work place." Respondent 8 indicated that place-based education was most beneficial, followed by service learning, saying, "Throughout the program, I gained friendships and truly enjoyed the place-based learning aspect of the program. . . . I think [the] team building day was essential in building [lasting] relationships. . . . The service [learning] project was so essential to understanding the need for leadership. . . . This project was essential in shaping me into a volunteer leader."

Objective Four: Identify Opportunities for Improving the Program

Finally, respondents offered ideas for program improvement. Thirty-six percent ($f = 4$) suggested incorporating more hands-on opportunities into the service learning projects. Respondent 5 stated, "What I really liked about LOOK to Clermont was hands-on activities. I believe that [the planning team could] incorporate more hands-on activities to give the students a taste of what it is like to do the jobs [being showcased]. If it is a government building, give us an activity in which a problem arises and how we can solve it. If it is an educational day, give us a topic that we have to teach to the class. I believe that doing activities will make a much greater impact to a student than if we sit down for hours listening to someone speak."

Of the six respondents who addressed the possibility of adding topics to the program, three stated that nothing should be added. Others mentioned the need to add information on emerging issues in specific careers, and one respondent suggested addressing life skills needed after high school. For example, Respondent 4 suggested adding topics such as "leadership in healthcare, non-profit sector and overcoming leadership barriers," and Respondent 5 suggested that information on "technology, engineering, cyber security and computers" was needed.

Study Conclusions

Overall, we found that students were pleased with their experiences and had had the opportunity to use the leadership skills gained through the program. Because participants are selected through nomination by their respective schools, it is possible that fewer at-risk students have had the opportunity to participate, which is a potential limitation of the program itself. With regard to our study, the low response rate is a limitation. Also, evaluating one's own program is a potential source of bias, and we note that this is typical for Extension

evaluation. However, now that we have documented strengths and opportunities, the LOOK to Clermont planning team can take action to improve the program.

LOOK to Clermont participants are remaining in their home county to live and work, possibly because they can access higher education or employment locally. They also are applying the leadership and service learning skills gained through the program. Past participants placed the highest value on team building, personal finance, and education theme days. This does not mean that the other days are not as valuable but implies that participants may not have had the opportunity to apply components of the other theme days at the time of the evaluation. The findings imply that participants may be looking for more guided learning strategies and reinforced theme day content, which aligns with Fertman and van Linden's (1999) statement that youths desire the experiential guidance to increase understanding and practical application of leadership behaviors and skills.

The program has supported participants' lifestyles by engaging them in experiences that develop their sense of place and leadership skills. We concluded that the study participants had not yet had the opportunity to apply all skills gained from the program due to their age and minimal time out of high school or in the workforce. Most of the respondents were still pursuing higher education. There will be an opportunity for additional evaluation activities once program participants have had time to gain more practical life experience with the place-based leadership concepts.

Recommendations

Extension Practice

Multiple recommendations can be made to improve programs such as LOOK to Clermont. Our evaluation findings suggest that it is important to synthesize a plan to develop program theme days that ensure long-term success. Program teams also should ensure that experiential learning and service activities are strong components of place-based youth leadership programs. As well, program teams should carefully consider how students are selected to ensure that at-risk student populations have the opportunity to participate.

As place-based youth leadership programs continue to expand nationwide, Extension professionals can learn from numerous aspects of our project. Extension professionals who conduct place-based youth leadership programs should perform annual in-depth program evaluations to allow for responsive changes that meet student participants' needs. An evaluation tool such as the one we designed for our study could be used to evaluate other place-based local leadership programs. Additionally, Extension professionals may find that there is an opportunity to improve their participant databases and better engage alumni in such programs over the long term to improve communication with and among future cohorts.

Extension professionals can use the findings reported here to communicate the value of place-based youth leadership programs to stakeholders. Extension professionals also could use these findings to develop an initial framework for new youth leadership programs in their communities. The LOOK to Clermont program serves as an example of cross-program-area collaboration for all Extension personnel and demonstrates the value of functional communication methods for Extension program alumni engagement.

Research

Another study will be necessary to reevaluate the impact of the LOOK to Clermont place-based leadership program in greater depth. Additional efforts could be used to control for low response rates in future studies. Due to the ages of the respondents and short time span following their participation, we believe the evaluation should be repeated in approximately 5 years. Extension professionals who design these types of programs need to ensure that a long-term evaluation plan and necessary resources are in place. Evaluating the programs over time will allow more participants to settle into their careers. There is also a need to research the competencies deemed important by community and business leaders who may employ students in the future. Documentation of the desired skills and traits would aid in establishing additional intermediate and long-term goals for these programs. Considerations for future discussion and studies include the need to minimize limitations by controlling for nonresponse and using external evaluators to address common challenges shared by Extension professionals.

Conclusion

The goal of place-based leadership is to develop relevant skills and create place attachment through shared experiences in order to build a connection to place that encourages skilled individuals to remain (Lachapelle, Austin, & Clark, 2010). By designing programs that are responsive to local needs and guided by sound evaluation, Extension professionals can build community with youths and contribute to lasting community vitality.

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